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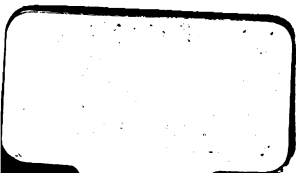
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THE HEIR
OF
AYLMER'S COURT.

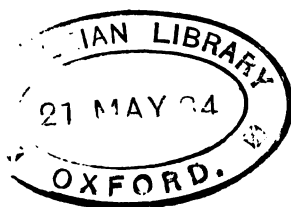
BY
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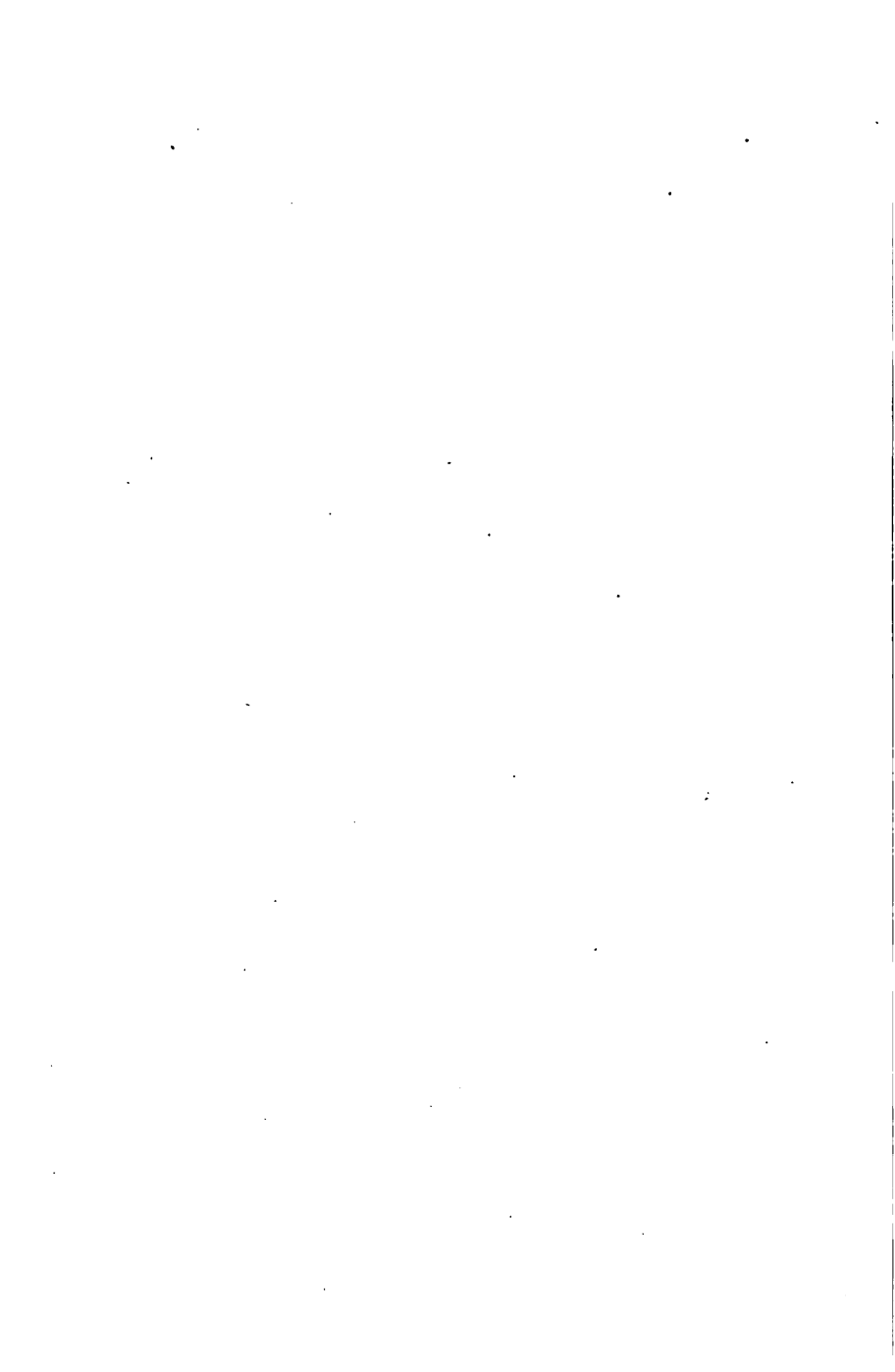
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THE
HEIR OF AYLMER'S COURT.

PART I.—*continued.*

CHAPTER XIV.

JEWELS AND TEARS.

IN the meantime the two women left in the anteroom sat up and looked at each other. Neither broke the profound silence left when Claud's hurried footfalls had died away ; Nurse was too terrified by this living proof of her negligent watch, Mrs. Hankey was too much startled by the sudden vision of Claud ; she was also in mortal terror lest Judith should appear

upon the scene ; and though she was not at all too proud to seek refuge in flight, yet for the moment her shaking limbs refused to carry her. So she sat looking at the nurse, and the nurse sat looking at her ; both too bewildered to speak for a space that seemed an hour, though it was probably not a sixth of that time : then Mrs. Hankey's mind assuming once more control of her body, she rose slowly, and stealing along with her usual cat-like tread, proceeded to leave the room. As she passed Mrs. Baker, the poor old woman tried to speak ; but the colourless eyes fixed on her scattered her powers, and she only stuttered some inarticulate sounds. In another moment she was alone in the anteroom. She was still sitting there, half paralyzed by terror, when Judith entered.

‘ You have let no one come here ? ’ she

asked sternly. 'No one has passed but that mad fool?' Then seeing the state of collapse into which the old servant had fallen, her mistress added hastily, 'What is the matter? Speak at once! What has happened?'

Nurse's internal struggles found an outlet in a flood of tears, which perhaps warded off a more serious seizure. For the first time in her life, she did not attempt to rise when spoken to by her imperious mistress, and no more convincing proof of utter perturbation of spirit could have been given by the faithful old woman than this.

'She sat in that chair there—opposite me,' cried Nurse, through her tears, 'looking as if she'd been there for an hour, which I make no doubt she had, the mean spy!'

'Who sat there?' asked Judith.

‘Mrs. Hankey, the housekeeper.’

Judith had known the answer, yet she had asked, willing to cheat herself even for a moment with a hope which she knew to be false. She said nothing; she did not reproach the old woman who had been so inefficient a sentry, and had slumbered on her post. Fate had done its worst now—Fate in the shape of Claud.

‘Oh, my dear mistress! oh, Madam Judith, don’t look like that; but blame me, for I must have dropped off to sleep—but not for five minutes, I could swear—only she sat there looking as if she’d been there an hour,’ repeated Nurse, on whom this fact had made a deep impression. ‘And listening, no doubt, to every word, the sly wretch—and Claud speaks so clear.’

Again there was a pause, broken only by the old woman’s sobs.

‘ Anyway, if she’d only come that moment, she *saw* Claud,’ continued Nurse, her brain clearing slowly. ‘ It is all over.’

‘ Did Claud speak to her ?’ asked Judith.

‘ Claud didn’t speak to, nor see anyone, but went out blind-like. I don’t know where she is, but she is catching cold, most likely.’

And Nurse struggled to her feet, and instinctively grasped a shawl. It was not in Mrs. Baker’s nature to remain on the heights of any emotion, however real and true, for a lengthened period : she descended as rapidly as she could into everyday life again.

‘ Never mind Claud. We have done with Claud for ever. We must think of ourselves now,’ said Judith, as if self-abnegation had hitherto been the rule of her life. She was thinking aloud, and was hardly conscious

that she had spoken, or of her companion's presence. Suddenly she roused herself. 'Nurse, we must go at once. That woman will sell her secret to Major Aylmer. I do not know what she may have heard;' and Judith thought of some of the words she had spoken to Claud, which she would have wished no other ears to hear. 'At all events, she must have heard quite enough to enable her to betray us—and she saw Claud. Pack up at once. I shall start about nine o'clock to-morrow, before the people come down to breakfast. I shall order the carriage immediately after the post has come in—called away suddenly on important business. Mrs. Aylmer will take my place, and believe my explanations.'

Judith was once more speaking her thoughts, regardless of her listener. Even at this crisis she was anxious to save

appearances; she was loth to own herself beaten: she was determined to play her part to the very last moment. Even now, desperate as seemed her position, something might happen to avert the crisis. Claud might come round to her view of the matter, and prefer death to disgrace; Jack might buy off Mrs. Hankey, and the scandal might be averted. When does not Hope whisper its 'may' and 'might,' its possible subjunctive happiness to every energetic, quickly beating heart? It was inexpressibly bitter to Judith to be compelled to seek safety in flight; but at least to the very last moment she would not own herself defeated. She turned suddenly to Mrs. Baker, who was in a helpless and confused way collecting the jewels which Judith had worn as Cleopatra, and who added more than one tear to the pearls and diamonds as

she arranged them in the soft-lined jewel-case.

‘You had better put up your things to-morrow, after I have received my letters ; it will look better ; even if you leave some things behind it will not matter,’ said Mrs. Crosby. ‘But do not betray yourself ; hold your tongue, and look as if nothing had happened.’

‘Me—pack up ?’ asked Nurse feebly. ‘I thought I was to stay. Oh, madam, mayn’t I stay ? You wouldn’t leave Claud here all alone in the midst of enemies ?’

‘Claud has no enemies ; they are rather her confederates. She is willing to betray us for the sake of propitiating them,’ answered Judith unjustly. ‘I told you before, we have done with Claud. You come with me, of course.’

But the old nurse’s heart burned within

her, with the fire of insubordination. She had yielded obedience, unwillingly and against all her natural instincts, for many a weary year to the stronger will of her mistress ; but the command to desert her nursling raised open revolt in her timid but faithful heart.

‘I don’t know nothing about confederates, but to leave Claud here alone among all these people—a play-acting, rammaging set—is what I won’t do,’ announced Mrs. Baker, with much firmness. Judith was inwardly enraged by the attitude taken by her hitherto pliant follower, but she masked her feelings with the ease born of years of falsehood ; and realizing that here, as in most other cases, diplomacy was better than violence, she answered with apparent gentleness :

‘Your faithfulness does you credit,

Nurse ; but if you will reflect for an instant you will find that the exercise of it at this moment will do your charge more harm than good. Remember that if you are here you will be called as a witness—against Claud. Think of yourself for one moment in the witness-box !

‘Good Lord deliver me !’ groaned the old woman.

‘When it came to questions and cross-questions, what chance would you have ?’ continued Judith, with cruel conviction.

‘You would deny and contradict, and utterly ruin Claud’s cause. In your anxiety to help, you would inevitably betray yourself and the whole story, and wreck poor Claud’s only chance of safety. In the absence of all evidence—that is, while you and I keep out of the way, Major Aylmer will probably be glad to

compromise the matter with Claud. Depend upon it, you may take my word for it, Claud will be safer without us than with us.'

This last sentence had an advantage over its fellows, in that it contained an undeniable truth. Claud was undoubtedly safer at a distance from Judith.

Mrs. Baker had dropped the jewels in a glittering heap on the dressing-table, and was rocking herself to and fro in Judith's own armchair. Her common sense told her that the estimate of herself in a witness-box was a correct one, and she did not stop to inquire whether it was probable that she would be placed there; the very idea of it terrified and bewildered her to the utter upsetting of her reasoning powers, a result Judith had securely calculated on. The trouble in the old nurse's brain was a very

real one—the fight between her own inclinations and Judith's arguments was desperate and bitter; and when she made her own wishes and feelings yield to the hope of securing additional safety for the child of her love, she had achieved perhaps as high a level of unselfishness as most of us attain to.

‘Not for your safety, nor yet for my own, but for Claud's sake I will go!’

CHAPTER XV.

THE WHITE LADY.

AND Claud lay on the terrace beneath Judith's window, caring nothing about who went or who stayed, caring nothing even for safety, with heart and brain filled only with that last taunt of her sister's. Utterly unfounded as it was, yet it had stung her fiercely; many a truer accusation would not have been so galling as this, the monstrous injustice of which ought to have been its own anodyne. Claud's conscience told her that she had looked on John Aylmer simply as the lawful owner of the estate, and on herself as the impostor who was keeping

him out of it ; but still those hateful words of Judith's rang in her ears. She had been placed in a different position from other women, and she might be excused if she were more sensitive than the majority of her sisters : an imputation that another girl might laugh off with easy scorn burnt into Claud's soul like fire, and branded itself there with a mark that was never quite effaced. Now in the first heat of it, she felt numb and sick with pain. She did not cry out or sob ; she remained perfectly motionless, crouched a white heap by the terrace wall, clenching her hands tightly together, and shuddering sometimes with the cold of strong emotion. The summer night in itself would have had no power to chill Claud's warm young blood ; but repressed agitation, sternly kept from relieving itself by shrieks and cries, sends a shivering

ague down each vein, and gives that feeling of deathly cold that the unfortunates consigned to the innermost circle of Dante's conception of hell may be imagined to endure.

For a time Claud's resolution wavered. Though it had been resolved on painfully and anxiously and after years of weary thought, yet these few words of Judith's made her sister falter. These cruel words had made a hard task harder—almost impossible. Not that Claud thought for an instant of remaining in wrongful possession of lands that were not hers, but there was an alternative. Judith had shown her the way, and for the first time Claud felt a strong temptation to follow her advice. The world seemed too hard for her: if her sister—the woman who had been beside her all her life and who might be imagined to

know all her thoughts and feelings—if she could so misjudge her, what would others do? Would they not all give her credit for the same despicable motive? Was there no love of truth for its own fair sake, anywhere?

Claud's heart sickened as she thought of it. Was it so strange to do a thing that was right because it was right, that it was thought necessary to add a second and a baser motive? Would the world judge as Judith had judged? If so, Claud felt she would rather be out of the world. Then a new thought entered her mind—a thought even more painful than its predecessors, as a particular evil is more dreaded than a general one. Might not John Aylmer himself think as Judith had thought? The idea was so intolerable to her that she started to her feet and moved to and fro

through the dark night in her restless agony. It did not occur to Claud that Judith might have said these terrible words simply as a relief to her anger, as a parting shaft dipped in poison aimed at the sister who had defied her, and at whom she was determined to fling an insult by any means, fair or foul. The girl's heart was honest and straightforward by nature, and it did not occur to her to doubt readily the truth of others, even when, as in this case, she might have been excused if she had been rather sceptical. It must be remembered that she had been brought up almost in solitude : she had never had a friend, never anyone nearer than a passing acquaintance picked up at a *table d'hôte* : she knew nothing whatever of the jokes and jeers that among some young people pass for wit ; even in small matters she

took what was said to her literally and seriously, *au pied de la lettre*. This is not surprising in one whose life from childhood had been a striving after truth ; at first a half-unconscious, blind reaching-out of the childish hands after what was dimly felt to be a great good, gradually a more determined but more desperate effort to grasp this desired treasure, only to be reached in this case by shame and humiliation hard to be borne, but still leaving to her a saving margin of self-respect. She had not thought particularly about her motives, she had felt so sure of them ; and it had never once occurred to her that anyone would doubt them.

In the calmness of a great despair she walked on slowly and feebly, down the wide terrace-steps, through the garden, along one of the stately avenues, and on into

the park. She turned from the road here, and went across the grass, brushing the dew from its fragrant flowers, crushing the clover under her feet, and startling birds and rabbits and timid wild things, but noticing nothing—no quick beat of wings, no smothered cry, no scuttling retreat through the long grass to the friendly shelter of bracken or bush. Claud had no definite object in roaming through the park, nothing but a vague desire to go away from the house and all who were in it. She moved along as a sleep-walker does, so absorbed in self as to be unconscious of external objects. The somnambulist may be held to be absorbed in a dream; but is not self the central object? Everything else is false and imaginary; but he is himself in the midst of the vague creations of his dream.

The night was dark, the trees stood black against an almost equally black sky : there seemed no hope in heaven and no help on earth. As Claud raised her despairing eyes, they were attracted by a faint gleam near at hand, the water of the lake giving out some dim reflection of the light it had absorbed all day. Any light, even the vaguest glimmer, was alluring, and the girl turned towards it instinctively ; and, tired as if she had walked for miles instead of only a few hundred yards, she sank down among the long grasses and the meadow-sweet which grew at the edge of the water. She wanted to rest—only that, it seemed to her for the moment. But while the body rested, the mind resumed its activity. She wanted to get to ‘where beyond these voices there is peace.’ Her sister’s want of faith in her had had an

overwhelming effect on her mind ; all the spirit and life had gone out of her. She did not doubt herself or her own motives ; but it seemed to her that if others were to judge as Judith judged, life would be impossible to her. Renunciation had not been so very difficult to her—she was a woman. To give up wealth seemed to her a slight thing. To leave for ever the home of her fathers had given her many bitter pangs, but she had resolved to do it. To confess her story had required the most courage of all her hard tasks ; but this also she was prepared to do. But the idea of confessing this story to one who did not believe in her honesty of purpose was an absolutely impossible idea to her. She would more easily make up her mind to die.

But her mind seemed stunned, her energy

and power of will were gone ; and she lay there among the sedges wishing vaguely for death, but almost lulled by the quiet of despair. Everything appeared unreal—the dim waters of the lake, the dewy, sleepy flowers around her—most of all herself. Some words that she had loved when she lived in Florence and worshipped Mrs. Browning, seemed to come to her, sighed by the night-wind :

‘ I sit and knock at Nature’s door,
Heart-bare, heart-hungry, very poor,
Whose desolated days go on.

‘ This Nature, though the snows be down,
Thinks kindly of the bird of June ;
The little red hip on the tree
Is ripe for such. What is for me,
Whose days so winterly go on ?

‘ I ask less kindness to be done—
Only to loose these pilgrim shoon,
(Too early worn and grimed) with sweet
Cool deathly touch to these tired feet,
Till days go out which now go on.’

Was it wrong to long for that 'cool deathly touch'? Claud longed for it so truly that she thrust her feet deeper into the chill wet grasses by the edge of the water, praying that the coldness might reach to heart and brain. And still the song went on :

'Only to lift the turf unmown
From off the earth where it has grown,
Some cubit space, and say "Behold !
Creep in, poor heart, beneath that fold,
Forgetting how the days go on."

'What harm would that do ? Green anon,
The sward would quicken, overshadowed
By skies as blue ; and crickets might
Have leave to chirp there day and night,
While my new rest went on, went on.'

What harm would that do ? There was no one, not one person in the world who required her. Those who were nearest to her, and to whom she ought to have been most necessary, would be infinitely better

off without her. This is a discovery seldom made by one so young as Claud ; and at any age it is hard to realize that other people can get on as well without us as with us—even, in some cases, infinitely better. Claud realized it very acutely ; for her, poor child, the world was indeed out of joint, and her death did seem the simplest way of setting it straight for those around her. She was trying to make up her mind ; if she made it up, she knew she had sufficient force of will to carry out the decision. Her brain still gave voice and meaning to the sighing wind :

‘ From gracious Nature have I won
Such liberal bounty ? May I run
So, lizard-like, within her side,
And there be safe who now am tried
By days that painfully go on ?’

To creep lizard-like into the warm brown earth. It was childish, perhaps ; but Claud’s

thoughts darted back to her little friendly lizard on the terrace, who knew her and was fond of her. To be so destitute of friends as to prize the love of a lizard! That seems hard at one-and-twenty; but any love that is real is always a gain, the greatest good to be found on earth. It was so now, for Claud burst suddenly into a passion of tears, which relieved her brain from the terrible pressure on it. It would be difficult to say whether it was the idea of leaving the lizards and all kind dumb creatures, or whether it was the absolute sense of her own friendlessness brought vividly before her that caused Claud's dry agony suddenly to give way; but the result was that she buried her face in her hands and wept healing tears.

And now a miracle happened—a miracle that happens daily, but is seldom seen or

thought of. From the farther side of the lake, where tall fir-trees stood dark against the sky, came a gleam and a brightening. The sighing night-wind turned into a merry little breeze of morning; the flowers seemed to stir and shake themselves; the birds began to wake and twitter; a lark shot up into the still dusky air, and poured out his hymn of praise. Claud rose up with a strange thrill of excitement—the night of sorrow was gone, the morning was about to dawn. She fixed her eyes on the line of light cut here and there by the stems of the trees: beneath, the purple horizon edged the light sharply; above was the darkness, still undispersed, of night. To Claud's excited fancy it had the appearance of a long low casement, through which she gazed, entranced, into another world. Heaven would help her; and as long as she

was true to herself, what did it matter whether men misjudged her or not ? She had a right to live her life, like the rest. She was so young, and life was so strong in her, and Hope sprang up in her heart so readily. The years to come must surely contain something of happiness and good for her, to make up for the miserable years of the past. She had had no happiness hitherto, nothing but anguish and deceit and anger ; but she felt that she could be happy if she had a chance—she had within her a grand capacity for happiness. She would not die until she had had her share of the common joys and woes of life like another, until she had lived her life and had taken all that it brought her of good and ill. Hitherto it had been unmixed ill ; but it could not continue like that always. Perhaps, even now, she had reached the

last and bitterest hour of darkness ; the light of liberty was dawning, she would walk on boldly into the day. Courage and confidence had come back to her with the light, and her usual large faith in the honesty of others had returned. John Aylmer was honourable ; of course he would understand instinctively ; he would forgive past deceit and concealment, remembering and pitying Judith. Had he not said such things were allowable 'to save a woman' ? John Aylmer would have been very much astonished could he have known the extraordinary interpretation his young cousin put on his words, though his kindly nature would have sanctioned any translation, however free, that brought comfort to one in trouble.

Claud knelt down among the wet rushes, and stretched out her hands towards the

dawn. She did not pray—Judith had taught her no prayers, and had severely reprimanded Nurse whom she had once caught instructing the child. Claud was as nearly as possible a heathen; she had had nothing to help her in her fight with fraud. She had a confused idea of Phœbus and Aurora mingled with the Light of the Christian world—as was not unnatural in one who had been brought up in a classic and Catholic land.

‘Let me live!’ she cried; ‘I wish to live. Let me make something of my life before I die. After all, there is always Nature, and the flowers, and the lizards; and then, after a little more pain, I shall find myself in Italy free—and myself—and an artist.’

She sprang up quickly from her knees, and went towards the house comforted. It

may seem strange that so ordinary a sight should have had so great an effect on her ; but it must be remembered that Claud had the artist-nature, impressionable and quick ; also that most of us who witness a summer daybreak are not generally in a position to appreciate the beauty of it. Either we have been at a ball, and feel disreputable in the pure light ; or we have had to get up to catch some inconveniently early train, and are troubled about sundry trifles, and sleepy and cross in proportion ; or we have been sitting up all night by the bed of a sick friend, and are too sad at heart to care for the radiant joy of the morning. The effect on Claud was magical ; she had thrown off the dark veil of doubt and sadness, and felt strong and undaunted once more. She was only one-and-twenty, and she had a new life before her.

She passed along the terrace, where a few hours before she had lain motionless and despairing, with quick light feet that scarcely seemed to touch the stones. An under-gardener, coming at this early hour through the grounds—let us hope on his way to his work—saw the white figure glide swiftly along the terrace. The almost-forgotten legend of the phantom lady was resuscitated from that moment, and is still believed in by the servants at Aylmer's Court.

CHAPTER XVI.

FLIGHT.

JUDITH carried out her programme exactly as she had planned it: she invariably did carry out her plans as she arranged them when the execution of them depended on her individual energy.

The post had presumably brought the business-letter that called her suddenly to town. The guests were most of them tired by their exertions (not very gigantic) of the previous evening; at all events, very few had appeared by the time the carriage came round to take Mrs. Crosby to the station. She had made her elaborate ex-

planation to Mrs. Aylmer, and had requested that believing lady to take the place of hostess during her own temporary absence.

‘Of course you’ll be back by Friday, my dear? Claud couldn’t come of age without you—you’ve had so much to do with it, you know.’

Judith glanced sharply at the old lady as she made this remark; but absolute innocence of all meanings save the obvious one, and not very much of that, was written on her placid countenance.

‘This is Tuesday—yes; I certainly hope to be back by Friday, unless something very unforeseen occurs,’ replied Judith.

‘Oh, my dear, you must be back by Thursday evening for the ball, you know! Everyone will be unmasked by twelve o’clock; but that won’t affect you and

me, my dear—we shan't wear masks, I fancy.'

And the old lady laughed at what she considered a jest.

'I don't approve of this introduction of masks at all,' said Judith severely. 'It is some folly of Miss Brand's. She and your son settle everything between them as they think fit.'

And, with this very unkind allusion to the absent Jack, Mrs. Crosby bade farewell to the elderly relative to whom she was supposed to be so devotedly attached.

She did not see Claud, but gave Nurse a letter to place in her room, in which Judith mentioned in which way she could be communicated with, in the very remote possibility of her presence being desired at Aylmer's Court. Nurse put the missive on Claud's dressing-table; and then she moved

noiselessly up to the bed, and took her last look at the face of her charge. Claud was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. Her face was very pale, and there were traces of tears about her eyes ; but round her mouth was a quiver almost suggestive of a smile. That sight comforted the miserable old woman, who had cried until she could cry no longer throughout the night, and who now gazed, dry-eyed and despairing, on her darling.

‘ She looks as if she was going to be happy at last, dear lamb ! I don’t know how, nor when, but she’ll come through somehow ; and better without us than with us, or I’d never leave her—no, not for a thousand Judiths. But how could we bring her anything but harm, as plotted against her from the very first ? Ah ! I’ve suffered for that night’s work, my dearie ;

and the worst suffering is that I must leave you, and you will only think I wronged you, and won't never know I loved you.'

And, not daring even to kiss her, or to ask for one token of love, or one word of forgiveness, Nurse Baker took a last look at her darling, and left her silently.

And so Judith left her father's house, the dear old home of her childhood and youth, a fugitive flying from justice, to whom the delay of even a few moments might have been dangerous, the very fact of whose flight had to be concealed. She, the proud daughter of a proud and honourable race, had been compelled to invent petty fictions to allay suspicions of footmen and maids. Had her revenge been worth this? She had had some measure of success, certainly—even now her eyes

flashed as she thought of it. She had kept John Aylmer out of the place for one-and-twenty years—all the best part of his life. During that time she had had the satisfaction of treating him as a poor cousin—as a sort of interloper ; but the pleasure of this thought was marred by the remembrance that John Aylmer had a very unpleasant and independent way of asserting himself, and, in his own forcible but inelegant language, generally ‘gave as good as he got.’ At this moment the carriage passed within sight of the terrace—the spot so intimately connected with Judith’s past life, where she had been so happy as a child, so adored and worshipped as a girl, so wretched as a woman—the place from which she had last seen her father a living man.

At this thought she suddenly covered

her eyes with her hand, and groaned aloud in the bitterness of her heart, regardless of any who might see or hear her. She had failed—she had failed utterly even in her revenge; and for the first time, consciously to herself, the sense of the failure of her plot brought with it an overwhelming knowledge of failure and loss in more vital matters: loss of dignity, loss—complete and irreversible—of self-esteem; failure in truth, and honour, and common honesty. Even if all could still be hidden, even if she were free to return to the old home, she felt at this moment that she could never bear to fix her guilty eyes upon those dearly-loved walls again.

And so she passes from our sight, self-doomed to perpetual exile.

People were not much surprised by her absence; indeed, some of them felt rather

relieved by it. Comings and goings are so quick and so constant in these days that no one has time to be curious over his neighbour's movements. Mrs. Crosby's position as hostess, and the sense—more or less felt by every inmate of the house—that there was something strained and unusual in her bearing towards Claud, caused more comments to be made on her sudden journey than that event would otherwise have called forth: still, as everyone understood that she would return for the ball, the interest displayed in the matter was not very keen; and each individual, as he or she dropped leisurely in to breakfast, showed that philosophic equanimity which is the most striking feature of society as it exists to-day, and bore the blow bravely.

‘I most eggzist vizoud her for two—zree days!’ said the Baron, as he helped

himself plentifully to omelette, turning a tragic visage towards his neighbour, a little girl just emancipated from the schoolroom, and causing that young lady to giggle restrainedly, as of old.

‘Had a shine with Claud—bet you anything you like!’ remarked a youth, *sotto voce*, to a friend, as they stood at a side-table attacking cold meats. ‘They’ve been on the verge of it for ever so long.’

‘Of course they have,’ assented his friend. ‘Small blame to Claud. I’d have been over the verge long ago. I like to be able to say my soul is my own.’

‘So good of Judith to go up herself about these tiresome business formalities,’ purred Mrs. Aylmer from the head of the table, thoroughly believing her tale. ‘But Judith was always too unselfish, don’t you know—and an excellent woman of business,

too. They say widows always are. I am sure in my own case, if it hadn't been for Jack, I should have been quite an authority on business matters by this time.'

'I should have thought it would have been less trouble to have had the man down,' suggested a practical matron.

'Judith would rather take trouble herself than give it to other people,' said Judith's loyal aunt. 'Besides, one man is coming down; this must be another man, you know.'

'By-the-way, what's become of Jack? He seems to be having a pretty good rest after his labours,' remarked one of his friends. 'I thought he set up for being such an early bird!'

'So he is,' answered his proud mother. 'He is detained by some tiresome business matter, and everything is getting cold.'

‘Including ze vorm?’ asked the Baron, who seemed bent on captivating his little companion by a facetiousness not above her intellect.

‘Claud hasn’t got over that headache yet,’ pursued Mrs. Aylmer. ‘I do think prompting is most headachy work. I found it so—and they all said I prompted in the wrong place, too.’

‘Did you ever meet with a prompter of whom they didn’t say that?’ queried Sally. She was looking fresher and brighter than ever, and her exertions seemed to have agreed with her.

Perhaps no one was more pleased—though she carefully concealed the feeling—at Mrs. Crosby’s departure than Sarah’s mother. Though she had no special reason for disliking Judith, still the old saw has it that two of a trade do not usually get on

well together ; and this is certainly not less true when the individuals are two scheming women. Now that Judith was out of the way, and that foolish boy Harry Johnson got rid of, only Major Aylmer remained ; and Mrs. Brand felt herself equal to any one man. She could not resist throwing a glance of exultation and triumph at her daughter, which very much astonished that young woman.

‘ Come and have some tennis while we still can throw a shadow for somebody else to stand in,’ she suggested to one of the Miss Bartons, who acquiesced with a smile. They always did acquiesce, even if they did not understand.

‘ A person who wished to avail himself of your shadow, Miss Brand, wouldn’t have much standing to do, I take it,’ remarked the young Oxonian.

‘Well, perhaps not—when I’m playing tennis,’ laughed Sally, darting off to the tennis-ground, followed by most of the younger people.

And so they all betook themselves to the pleasures of the moment, without more thought of Judith than was comprised in a passing remark such as the youth who wished to bet on the event occasionally made to his friend. ‘Wish I was as sure I’d passed as I am that there has been a row. Look here, old man! I’ll bet you a hat against a clay-pipe on it.’

‘Don’t see how we’re to find out,’ growled the friend, who found the subject uninteresting.

So easily are we forgotten, so readily do people find out how well they can do without us, that though it might have made rather more sensation at first, it is doubtful

whether the feeling would have lasted longer or gone much deeper if it had been known definitely that Judith had left her old home for ever, and that among her friends and relatives and in her own country she would henceforward, as the Baron would have expressed it, cease to circulate.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY.

JACK was, as his fond mother affirmed, habitually an early riser. Though not a man of very weighty mental calibre, he was not by any means so ignorant as it pleased him, from a mistaken British modesty, to allow himself to appear. He was, at all events, an excellent man of business. It was his custom to get up betimes, and if there was any business to be transacted to get it over before breakfast. When there was none, as frequently happened when he was staying at Mrs. Aylmer's small domicile, if the morning

were fine he strolled about the place, enjoying all the dewy freshness, the glamour that so soon wears off, in a manner that the people who knew him best would not have recognised in him. If it rained, he—a still stranger fact for his friends—absolutely read ; not the news of the day, not works of fiction, but that more solid style of literature, to which he was supposed to be absolutely inimical.

Here, at Aylmer's Court, however, he usually was occupied by veritable business, in accordance with the wishes of Claud, who had wearied him with entreaties to undertake all such matters until he had consented ; and he had found himself virtually in the position of master of the estate, though to himself and others he gave his position the name of head-agent. He had already, on this Tuesday morning,

held one or two audiences in the business-room, and was meditating an exodus into the dining-room, and an inroad into the good things to be found therein, when he perceived that the doorway was occupied by the slim, not to say lanky, figure of Mrs. Hankey. How long she had been there, Jack could not say; he had no idea she was there until he saw her. Probably when the last bucolic applicant had taken himself off, she had slipped in stealthily under cover of his retreating hobnailed boots. She stood there without attempting to speak; she was apparently occupied in gasping, in an underhand manner, for breath.

Jack was distinctly annoyed; he did not like the housekeeper, and he did not choose to be detained by her to hear requests or complaints, and something of the sort

seemed to be hovering on her pale lips. He spoke more brusquely than usual:

‘Good-morning, Mrs. Hankey. They’re late with breakfast. Oh, there’s the gong, thank goodness!’

‘Would you mind waiting for your breakfast for a few minutes, sir? I have something to tell you.’

Mrs. Hankey rather gasped than said these words.

‘My good woman, go to your master or your mistress,’ remarked Jack coldly; ‘I can have nothing to do with the affairs of the house, though my cousin has asked me to look after some of his farming matters.’

‘I can’t go to them—they’d be the last people I could go to,’ murmured Mrs. Hankey.

‘Well, you really must excuse me,’ said

Jack, showing a decided intention of cutting the argument short by taking himself off. 'This is not in my province, and I could not possibly interfere with Mrs. Crosby.'

'Very well,' said the housekeeper desperately. 'I warn you fair, Major Aylmer, that if you won't hear me, I go straight to the nearest magistrate, and tell my story to him—I'm ready to make a deposition upon oath. For the sake of the family, you'd better listen, sir.'

Jack complied very ungraciously. He disliked and distrusted this woman more than ever; and nothing but the idea that he might save his young cousin some trouble in the matter would have induced him to attend to her story at all. He turned back into the business-room, but did not take his usual judicial easy-chair;

he remained standing, and allowed Mrs. Hankey to do the same, as a hint that the shorter she cut the interview the better he would be pleased.

The housekeeper, however, seemed to find a difficulty in beginning ; she turned a greenish-white, and began to gasp once more.

‘ Well, what is it?’ said Jack impatiently, unmindful of the sex and agitation of his visitor, and thinking, it must be owned, of breakfast.

‘ Major Aylmer,’ began the housekeeper impressively. ‘ Sir, there has been a fraud going on for years, and under your own roof.’

‘ I haven’t got a roof,’ responded Jack shortly ; ‘ I live in lodgings, and at my club.’

‘ Under this roof, which is your own—

your rightful own, though you've been kept out of it this one-and-twenty years.'

'I've been kept out of it by the rightful owner—like an Irish tenant,' said Jack, to whom the affair began to show its absurd side.

'You are the rightful owner, as I will show you in a moment ; but you must turn your thoughts back for a time, sir. Do you remember the time of your uncle's marriage ?'

'Of course I do,' responded Jack, beginning to look upon the woman as a harmless 'unatic.

'Perhaps you can remember a little farther back—Miss Judith's anger when you wouldn't have anything to say to her?'

Jack turned a dusky red, and spoke in his haste something that sounded like a finable word ; but Mrs. Hankey interrupted

him as he was telling her shortly to leave the room.

‘I only want you to see the motive, sir. You were never to enjoy the property, at any risk. For this Miss Judith was willing to undergo a step-mamma, as she’d naturally have abhorred otherwise ; for this, after the death of the old squire, her whole heart was set on having a little brother—not to love and cherish—but to cut you out with. For this she was even ready to lower herself and to marry my master—a country surgeon of no family, no riches, no talents even—so they said. She, who was that proud that she looked on most men as door-mats——’

‘But,’ interrupted Jack, ‘what’s that got to do with it? Miss Aylmer did not marry till after her brother’s birth. You must be mad——’

‘Must I?’ interrupted Mrs. Hankey, in her turn. ‘Wait till you’ve heard me. What if the brother was not a brother after all?’

‘What?’ said Jack stupidly.

‘What if she was so determined that it should be a brother that she’d have gone against heaven and earth and the law and the Gospel to gain her will?’ queried Mrs. Hankey, in a triumphant voice, fixing keen, colourless eyes upon her astonished companion. ‘What if she frightened the fool of a nurse till she durstn’t say her soul was her own? What if she bribed the only other witness—my master, Dr. Crosby, a man much too good for her, though she despised him; what if she bribed him to silence by giving him herself and her fortune?’

Astonishment kept Jack silent, and after

a short pause of triumph, Mrs. Hankey, having now found her tongue, proceeded :

‘ And bitterly he rued the day, poor man, though it gave him a bride as was thought beautiful, and rich, and noble. It’s my belief he never had another happy day. A man so changed by prosperity it has never been my lot to see before or since. It broke his heart—that and remorse.’

‘ Remorse for what? I don’t understand,’ said Jack feebly, utterly bewildered.

‘ And no wonder you don’t—an honest gentleman like you,’ continued the housekeeper affably. She wanted to propitiate Jack. ‘ How could you think of such a scheme to defraud your own cousin? Miss Judith did, though. Yes, even with the poor young mother dying in the next room.’

‘ But what did she do?’ again asked Jack. ‘ Is not Claud my uncle’s son?’

‘Claud is your uncle’s daughter,’ replied Mrs. Hankey calmly.

Jack stared at her in speechless amazement ; and then a new experience befell him—a feeling of trembling insecurity assailed his hitherto reliable limbs, and he sank helplessly into the easy-chair from which he had hitherto on principle abstained. He was too much perturbed to speak, too much bewildered to understand. Mrs. Hankey, however, having broken the ice, fished up bucketfuls of the muddy water of her memory.

‘Which you might have come to the conclusion yourself, sir—for what else could have accounted for Mrs. Crosby’s ways? Her taking the child off and bringing it up in heathen countries, where they don’t hardly know the sound of good, honest English when they hears it; her marrying

my poor master to make him hold his tongue ; her taking that old fool, Mrs. Baker, along everywhere—as my lady's-maid, indeed, and she that blind that she can't tell a white pin from a black one, and that stupid she'd brush her missis's hair with the wrong side of the brush as likely as not ; but Mrs. Crosby durstn't let her out of her sight, so she had to turn the old idiot into a maid. But besides all this, I've watched them ; in your interest, sir, I have even demeaned myself to listen. Night and morning have I tracked them—mostly unknown to themselves—and never lost a chance, or a word hardly. Claud speaks low but very clear, and the language used was plain. They'd fall out about something, and then take to threaten each other ; and so I've heard the story plain enough from their own lips. But that isn't all, sir,' con-

tinued the housekeeper triumphantly, fixing her evil eyes on Jack, who was still too dumbfounded to speak, and who had not heard one word in ten that she had spoken. ' That isn't nearly all the proof I am willing to produce in your service. Time I have given up to worriting out this secret—and my own comfort many and many a time has had to stand over; but I've said : " He's a grateful heart, has Major Aylmer, and a spirit of justice ; he will not forget them as was always his friends, and worked day and night in his cause." Not to mention the danger of it, for Mrs. Crosby is a dangerous woman when roused, as you've had every call to know, yourself, sir. Well, last night I had the strongest proof of all, for, as they say, seeing is believing. I heard plenty, too, for there was an awful row between them, and they spoke plain, and Claud

threw all Judith's lies right in her teeth. And Judith, she spoke plain too; anyone, even a man, would have understood. And then as I was rather near the door, it was burst open sudden, and Claud came out right against me almost; and a beautiful young woman she looked, though in a mortal rage, and dressed as such. And if you wish it, sir, I'm ready to go before anyone, or into any court, and take my Bible-oath as to what I've heard and seen.'

And Mrs. Hankey paused at length for breath and an answer. Jack had recovered his senses, and gave her one.

'Go to the devil!' he said, pointing towards the door, as the first step to be taken. And Mrs. Hankey went.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CARRIAGE-HORSES.

JACK AYLMER had hitherto been one of the most easy-going of mortals ; he had, as a rule, liked other people, and other people had in return liked him. There was nothing of the sceptic about him ; and he regarded a cynic with good-humoured pity, as a man who indulged in uncomfortable feelings likely to be the cause as well as the result of indigestion. In his uncritical eyes most men were good fellows, most women were admirable, and, unless he held very distinct proof to the contrary, all people were honourable.

That a lady—and a lady of his own family, of which, in a quiet way, Jack was intensely proud—should be guilty of conduct not only dishonourable, but absolutely fraudulent, sent a shock through his whole system, from which he took refuge in absolute disbelief. It was a hundred times easier to him to believe that the house-keeper was mad, than to credit for an instant her wild story. Was it likely, or even possible, that his proud and beautiful young cousin should have entered into a conspiracy with a servant and a doctor, not for the purpose of enjoying the estate herself, but simply for the revengeful pleasure of keeping him out of it? Jack loyally declined to believe a word of it. The woman's story had staggered him at first, but he was master of himself again now. He half laughed to think how his wits had

been scared away for a time merely by pure astonishment. The woman had strung her wild invention together with some force, and there had been parts of Judith's life which had struck him as being mysterious—her marriage, for instance, and—— But here Jack sprang hastily out of his judicial chair, and betook himself off in search of breakfast. When he got near the dining-room door, however, and heard the merry voices and the laughter within, he turned away hastily and went out into the shrubberies. He felt he could not face them all at that moment; he had had a scare, and he must give himself just a little while to get over it. So he sauntered about with his hands in his pockets, and tried to whistle and not to think; but the effort was only moderately successful. The tunes would not come, and the thoughts

would. What is there, after all, in this world, which some people hold to be so matter-of-fact, that is more difficult to get away from than a haunting thought? A creditor may be evaded, a bore may be shaken off, any material object may be avoided; but a thought that is carried about in your own brain is a troublesome thing to get rid of: it accompanies you in your amusements, in your devotions, in your occupations, and even in your dreams.

Jack thought he would try a cigar; that had been a panacea which had never failed him before on the rare occasions when he had been in trouble, and he thought he would try it now. He did not usually smoke before breakfast; but this morning he did not seem to care much about breakfast, though he had been hungry enough half an hour before. So he struck a

vesuvian and lighted a cigar, and felt some comfort in so doing. That was as it used to be; at all events, there was nothing changeable about that. Most things seemed to have rocked a little since the morning—he supposed it was himself, that confounded woman had given him such a turn.

Smoking was undoubtedly an improvement on whistling, and while he puffed away with some satisfaction an admirable idea came into his head. He would go to the stables and have a look at the horses. There was sure to be something wrong about some of them which would divert his attention and occupy his mind. For the first time in his life, Major Aylmer almost wished that at least one horse should require to have his legs bandaged, and the excitement of even some greater evil would not at this moment have been altogether

unwelcome to him. Perhaps other people besides Jack may have found this state of mind a fact in their past experience—when a positive misfortune, not only to others, which might be easily understood, but even to our own possessions or person, is welcomed as a relief from a haunting, uncertain dread. Nothing is so horrible as uncertainty ; positive evils are faced and conquered ; one must reconcile one's self to the inevitable, and, with a good or a bad grace, in the end one does so.

Jack sauntered slowly into the stable-yard, trying very hard to think about nothing. A groom was dashing water over the wheels of a dogcart, hissing vigorously, and appearing to enjoy the ineffable self-satisfaction produced by that operation in the manly mind, though it does not seem to have the same effect on the feelings of snakes

and ganders. Major Aylmer passed the man without even a curt 'Good-morning,' very much to the surprise of the latter, who wondered, in his short phraseology, 'what was up.'

Absently and instinctively Jack turned into the stable where, in a large loose box, his favourite roadster resided. The horse, as a matter of fact, was Claud's, but the accident of ownership did not count for much between the cousins. In the next box was a weight-carrying hunter, destined for Jack's delight, and to whose future he looked forward with greater interest than he often felt towards any of his own species. So far all was just the same as usual, and Jack's confidence in things in general began to return. He commenced a discourse with a second groom about bandages and the hack's legs, and kindred subjects ;

and he almost persuaded himself that he had succeeded in driving away the thought that haunted him ; almost, but not quite. As long as you are conscious that you want to drive away a thought, the thought is there.

Jack sauntered on, trying to think he was quite comfortable and happy ; he whistled airily as he looked into a second stable, where he expected to find the carriage-horses. Two of the stalls were vacant.

‘ Halloa ! where are the horses ? ’ cried Jack to the carriage-cleaning groom.

The man stopped hissing, and touched his cap.

‘ Gone to the station, sir, to meet the 9.40 up.’

‘ The station ! I didn’t know any of them were going to-day — thought they

would all stay over the ball. Some young fellow, I suppose? Hardly necessary to take out the best carriage-horses, though. Who's driving them?

But the question answered itself; for at that moment the horses, driven by Jones himself, the old family coachman, turned into the yard.

'Jones, by Jove!' exclaimed the Major *sotto voce*. 'Jones to turn out at this hour! *Who* can have left this morning, that Jones should think it necessary to go himself with his best carriage and horses?'

Jack felt a very queer sensation creeping over him—he almost dreaded the sound of his own voice; he very distinctly dreaded the answer to the question which he was about to ask, which he felt compelled to ask, in spite of his reluctance.

‘ You are out early, Jones,’ he said, trying to be indifferent. ‘ Who went to the station, and required all this state?’

‘ My mistress, sir,’ replied Jones, who was an old-fashioned servant. ‘ Bless your heart, the best of everything is none too good for her. She ain’t a lady as you could offer to put in any kind of a conveyance ; it wouldn’t look noways suitable to her, unless it were handsome and costly.’

Jones allowed himself to be a little free and easy with Major Aylmer ; though one of *the* family (to Jones there was only one family in the world worth speaking of), he was not the head of it. He regarded the young heir with interest, largely mixed with awe — Claud’s silent dreamy ways being incomprehensible to the coachman, the chief object of whose respect and adoration was Judith, whom he had taught

to hunt and to drive, and of whose courage and skill he had been intensely proud.

‘She ought to marry a lord—Miss Judith ought,’ he used to observe, after a stiff day.

And it is certain that Judith’s marriage had been a severe blow to the old man—second only, perhaps, to the sudden death of his old master.

Jack Aylmer had not quite expected this answer to his question ; at least, he had dreaded to hear another name besides Judith’s. If both had gone—then, indeed—— He could not bear the suspense ; and, in a voice that seemed to him strangely unlike his own, he asked :

‘Did my cousin accompany Mrs. Crosby?’

‘Not he, sir. Master Claud weren’t even down to see her off : you don’t catch

the young folks now getting up before they can help it. It were sudden—my mistress's start were : some of these nasty telegrams, no doubt. The notice were short ; but no carriage but this should take her to the station, and nobody but me should drive her.'

Jack had not listened to the end of this peroration. His first feeling was one of relief ; it was all right—Claud had not gone. But the more he reflected, the more uncomfortable he felt. Judith's sudden departure looked singularly like flight ; and, coming immediately after the housekeeper's revelations, it seemed to confirm them. Claud might have elected to remain, and wait the chances of Fortune. While he thought it over anxiously as he walked on into the shrubbery, a sudden wave of conviction surged over his mind ;

he knew that the tale that he had heard was true. He leant against a tree for a moment ; for his limbs shook, his heart beat, and his nerves, usually so strong, played him false for once. He felt as if the earth had reeled somewhat, and trembled still. That Judith could have entered into such a conspiracy, could have been false and dishonourable, forgetful even of the traditions of her race, filled him with disgusted horror. That her motive was revenge, or it may be revengeful love, awoke no softer feeling in his breast. Jack was no coxcomb. With plenty of faults, especially of omission, he was, at least, perfectly free from the crowning sin of self-worship ; he had, from his boyhood, held Adonis to have been an ass, and had even wished he had lived in those days that he might have kicked him. He did not

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think much of manly charms at any period—from the Grecian down to the Victorian ; and he had a decidedly low estimate of his own attractions. Consequently, his verdict on Judith's conduct was a harsh one, untinged by any rose-coloured self-complacency. It *was* hard for her to leave the place, he thought ; but why couldn't she come to him openly and say so, instead of dragging herself and others into this mire of deceit and fraud, and blasting an innocent baby-life ? Some arrangement might have been come to ; he had always felt that her claim to the place was morally greater than his, though legally it might not be held so. Her crime was of her own seeking ; and it combined want of trust and want of generosity with more startling failures. He stood upright once more, and his nerves ceased to tingle, and a dark

frown totally destroyed his usually contented expression while he arrived at this conclusion about his cousin's conduct.

A burst of laughter from the tennis-players came to him on the sweet summer air. He felt he could not face them at present, and he turned and fled. For the first time in his honest and straightforward life, John Aylmer wished to hide himself from sight; he felt as if the reflection of a sin were on him, and he was ashamed of any trace of the baleful fire. As he would have said himself, lurid glows were not in his line, neither was shame, nor doubt, nor perplexity. He plunged deep into the heart of a wood, where, protected by briar and brushwood, he could think out his thoughts in peace. His thoughts chiefly turned on Claud. What would his young cousin do? Proclaim the truth, or be

silent ? It was a horribly painful position either way. Of one thing Jack was resolved—if Claud did not speak, neither would he ; Mrs. Hankey should be silenced, and things should go on as before. He recognised the fact clearly and at once that Claud had not been to blame ; the child had been, far more than he himself, the victim of a plot, and he at all events would not visit the sins of others on her young head. Now suddenly there came across him the memory of her sadness, of her isolation, of her wistful eyes, of her strange questions.

The glare in which he stood mentally threw a light on these questions : he understood now. It was no question of doctrine which had troubled her conscience : it was the difference between truth and a lie, honour and deceit, a clean life and a false

one. This was the lie that had to be lived in order to save a woman. How greatly Jack had misunderstood, and how irrelevant his answers had been! He gave a short laugh at the recollection, but at the next moment he felt his eyes grow dim and troubled. It was no laughing matter for the young soul that was trying to fight its way upward—that had put out feeble, vague hands, feeling, like one that is blind, for its path. And she had been so utterly alone, without the help of friends or of faith. She had been brought up without religion, without any community of thought, in perfect isolation. He understood now her love of solitude, he sympathized with it, at this moment he felt it himself; the peace of this quiet place was grateful to him. How much more must she have needed it, who was tossed by doubts, agonized by shame,

and at war with the sister who should have been her guide and support ! He realized keenly the great desolation of the young girl's past life, and, above all, the question sounded in his ears—the very birds seemed to repeat it : ‘ What will Claud do now ? How will she decide, now that she is left with her fate in her own hands ? Will she speak, or will she be silent ? ’

He stayed for hours in his lonely wood, sad and absorbed as ever Claud had been ; while his mother had got hold of the remarkable idea that he had breakfasted with the housekeeper, and went about absently framing in her gentle mind the vaguest of reproaches on the want of dignity—she could not consider it impropriety—of his conduct.

And Jack came home with his head full of one idea—Claud's decision, and with his

heart full of pity for his young cousin's woes.

‘Whatever happens, if she does not speak, I shall not. Poor little Claud ! she shall find that this is one of the occasions when a man may connive at a lie—to save a woman.’

CHAPTER XIX.

DOUBTS.

THE few days that elapsed between Mrs. Hankey's revelation and the fancy ball that marked the eve of Claud's coming of age were days of bewilderment to Jack—days of doubt and of painful uncertainty. This was a totally new experience in his hitherto uneventful life ; his custom had been to take things easily. If he had understood Italian a little better than he did, which was very slightly indeed, he might have taken as his motto the proverb, 'Chi vuol vivere farà bene, prender il mondo come viene.' He took the world as

it came ; and it seemed to him not to come amiss, though he was not rich, nor great, nor powerful. He had, however, a number of other blessings, which had been quite sufficient to form his happiness. He had excellent health, innumerable friends, and an income sufficient for his wants ; but, more than all this, he was a man who was not troubled by doubts. The 'splendid discontent' of poets was utterly unknown to him. He had never sent up impatient questions to heaven, waiting vainly for an answer : the dumb appeal against the Unknown, which looks so wistfully out of some eyes, and stirs our hearts by its vague pathos, never appeared through those blue windows of his soul. He believed in his friends ; he believed in his life ; and he believed in his God.

Now, a sudden blow had struck his care-

less faith, and it staggered, and all things seemed to reel with it. Judith's desperate deception had given him doubts as to the faith and honesty of others. Of course a man of his age had not passed through the world without meeting with many cases of dishonesty before ; but they had not affected him in a like manner. What struck him so sorely in this matter was that this woman was a lady of his own race, reared in all honourable traditions ; that she had been regarded as a queen among them with her stately presence and haughty manners—any poor penitent, who called herself a sinner, was less culpable than she, and more easily to be pardoned ; and, lastly, that there had been no pressure of poverty in the case. He could have forgiven theft in a woman pinched by hunger : Judith was rich, even without

Aylmer. It will be seen that Jack put the question of love and revenge completely on one side.

Jack watched his young cousin in these days with an anxiety and pain that he had never felt before. He was bewildered by Claud's conduct. Sometimes when he looked at the clear eyes and open, honest brow, he believed in her; but more often he doubted her. Brought up in such a school, what could have been expected of her? He had thought that she had felt prickings of conscience; her questions, and even the housekeeper's testimony, had seemed to show a striving after the right—a strong resistance to the deceitful life forced on her. But now his faith in her was shaken. She was so bright, so gay; with Judith's departure, the shadow had fallen from her, and she absolutely seemed

to be looking forward to this fancy ball with all the eagerness natural to her age ; but not, Jack thought, to her circumstances.

‘ If she does not speak, I shall not,’ Jack had said staunchly, and he meant it ; but he was conscious of a growing disappointment.

He had thought very highly of his young cousin, and now his estimate was slowly sinking. To do Jack justice, he thought more of his cousin than he did of the place or the fortune, though it would not be in human nature not to think of them a little. People talk with scorn of mixed motives ; but are our motives, except in our youth, ever anything else but mixed ? Still, we may safely say that if Jack had had his choice, he would have preferred never to have heard this story,

which brought disgrace to his family, though fortune to himself. He was—it may sound an anomaly—an unselfish man, though he was keenly alive to pleasure, fond of amusement, and addicted to the good things of this world. But he had hitherto been rather destitute of the attribute which, for want of a better word, is sometimes called ‘soul’—a quality which a consistently cheerful life is hardly calculated to call forth. If uncertainty, trouble, keen anxiety for another’s moral health constitute the atmosphere in which this vague emanation from the heart and brain of man takes birth, then John Aylmer’s soul was born now. The growing look of unrest and of doubt changed the expression of his face, till even his mother, the most unobservant of mortals, noticed it. Of course she attributed it to a wrong

cause ; she imagined that he had fallen in love with Judith, and that it was his cousin's absence that drove him to abstraction and melancholy.

‘ My dear Jack, Judith will be back in time for the ball—by Friday, at latest,’ she would purr to her bewildered offspring, thereby increasing his bewilderment.

What was she talking of ? What did she mean ? Judith would not return, and he was far from desiring that she should do so. His mother's consolations were, in the irritable state of his nerves, more than he could bear, and he absented himself from her and from people in general as much as he could without exciting remark. As it was, several of his friends wondered what had happened to him ; but they wondered passively, and did not actively annoy him—being perfectly satisfied to believe that

the disturbing cause was probably either debt or approaching gout.

So Jack, to his own great astonishment, found himself copying Claud's eccentric conduct, going about listlessly and alone, carrying an unanswered question in his eyes, doubting and battling with his doubts. Claud, on the contrary, had cast melancholy to the winds ; fighting and doubting for her were past ; she had resolved what she would do, and Judith's absence left the way clear to her. With the elasticity of youth she forgot her troubles, her spirits rose triumphantly, and she resolved to enjoy these last few days of the life she had decided to renounce. Jack, however, could not know this, and he attributed her evident relief of mind to a very different motive ; he saw plainly enough that the struggle was over, but he took the victors for the

vanquished. The dreamy appeal had passed away from her eyes—but how could Jack guess in what way the question had been decided? Besides, he naturally concluded that if she meant to speak she would speak at once and get it over; he did not know that she had a fixed idea that anything she might say or write before she was twenty-one, would have no legal value. She was waiting keenly as Cinderella waited for the magic hour to strike; but, unlike the nursery heroine, Claud longed to hear the sound of the clock, and elected of her own free will to go forth poor, shorn of her false trappings—but free.

So relieved in mind was she that she began to take an interest in the affairs of others; she had been so isolated from the lives and troubles of her acquaintances that she had grown self-centred. The first

blessing brought to her by her decision was that she could think less of herself ; she could put herself on one side—all that was settled—and give her attention to the claim for sympathy which all friends demand.

For the first time, too, she had a friend, and a friend whose demand for sympathy was urgent. Little Sarah Brand was very unhappy ; and Claud determined to try to lighten this unhappiness before she went out into the world alone. She had never been in a position to do any good to any one before, and the idea of it was charming to her ; she had never been behind the scenes during a romance before, and the necessity of doing her utmost to help the lovers was as strong on her as on a little child at a play, who thinks it incumbent on it to afford important information at a critical moment

at the top of its voice to the distracted heroine.

Claud had a plan of her own, of which she was so proud that it was with difficulty she could keep it to herself. There was no particular reason why she should—in fact, for many reasons it would be better that Jack should know ; so on the Thursday morning she stopped him as he was strolling off alone, as usual.

‘I want to speak to you for a moment, Jack ; I have something to tell you.’

‘Yes?’ queried Jack.

‘But you must be cautious. It is a secret.’

‘A secret!’

He turned red, and then white, and gasped a little. But the young face before him was smiling, and the eyes were untroubled. Jack was staggered.

‘Yes, a secret—for a few hours. Who do you think is coming to the fancy ball to-night?’

‘Hang the fancy ball!’ muttered Major Aylmer, between his teeth; perhaps the word he used was even a little stronger than this, but it was partially choked by his moustache. He turned brusquely and went off, leaving Claud transfixed by astonishment. Was this the good-natured Jack Aylmer? Claud thought the gout or the debts must be very imminent—she hoped it was the latter. ‘Then he will be quite happy in a few hours’ time, and will know he need never be troubled about money-matters any more,’ she thought, with the happy ignorance of youth.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FANCY BALL.

A WILD scene for a staid English country house. Had those suits of armour been filled by the stalwart bodies of their sometime occupants, the mailed hands might well have been lifted up in surprise, and the visors raised in amazement at the strange spectacle presented to their view in the stately old hall of Aylmer. It was filled with a crowd of extraordinary beings, who floated, rushed, elbowed, or glided, as their fashion of dancing impelled them. A great many were not waltzing, but preferred meandering round the room,

scrutinizing every head and figure in the crowd, and trying to distinguish friends from—not enemies, but merely nonentities. Several of the Kings and Queens of England were there, though they might hardly have been recognised as such on the strength of their regal bearing, unassisted by appropriate costume. Mary of Scots was plentifully represented, generally by ladies whose figures might fitly be described by the quaint old adjective ‘dumpy ;’ their faces at present were, perhaps mercifully, hidden from view. For this was a masked ball, and the masks were only to be laid aside at twelve o’clock, the hour that completed Claud’s twenty-first year. The arrangements for the evening had been made by Sally, and if there was a somewhat dramatic turn about them, she alone was responsible for it. Claud, indeed, had

seconded all her suggestions warmly, especially since Jack had taken to solitude, and Sally herself had not been in her usual force. Very dejected and subdued that small maiden had become ; she had almost ceased to be amusing, and when any of her friends—we refer to youthful males—ventured on their favourite enlivenment of ‘drawing Sally,’ she flashed back retorts which had more of temper and less of humour than her answers of old.

‘It must be the Baron,’ soliloquized Mrs. Aylmer. ‘The child has never been the same since that play. If I had a dozen daughters they should never play sentimental parts. But yet love is so exquisitely pathetic—the one ineffable good to be desired—in books ; in real life it does disagree with people so. For myself, I never tried it, except through poems—Dante

Rossetti's, and all those; of course I married Mr. Aylmer, but that was totally different.'

Persons of mature years were exempted from the rule, and Mrs. Aylmer was not masked : she was, however, in fancy costume, and the choosing of this had cost her much time, much anxious thought, many researches ; and, we may add, it had cost her friends much weariness of spirit, save when they enlivened the discussion by irreverent jests, luckily unperceived by the worshipper of the thirteenth century and its great poet.

' Really, I can't remember any character among them all that would suit you, Mrs. Aylmer,' remarked the most long-suffering and the oftenest consulted of her friends ; ' theirs were rather no-character parts, don't you know—Dido, Helen, Francesca, Cleo-

patra, and all those. I think, perhaps, "l'antica Rachele" was the most respectable individual you are likely to find among those shades.'

But Mrs. Aylmer did not fancy 'l'antica Rachele,' and it was a relief to those who cared for the fitness of things that she did not; as her type of features was presumably extremely unlike that of the beautiful Jewess. At last Mrs. Aylmer decided to appear as Gemma, the long-suffering wife of the poet, to whom she bore six stout sons and one sweet girl-child, Beatrice. Gemma may have been an uninteresting, everyday woman, but she must at least have had some sterling good sense and some magnanimity of heart when she gave this name to her daughter. Miss Johnson appeared as Beatrice—not in her 'Beata' period, not even when, as

the wife of Simone dei Bardi, she was worshipped at a distance by her poet-lover ; but when, as the young Beatrice Portinari, she caught the boy Dante's heart and soul at once and for ever. Her representative was accurately attired in 'the most noble colour, a subdued and goodly crimson.' How little could the Florentine sewing-woman who fashioned the little garment so many centuries ago ever have guessed that it would become immortal ! The flame-coloured hue was rather nearly akin to the tone of Miss Johnson's tresses, and the little Beatrice who wore this dress was only nine years old ; but there was no reason why a toilette which had such a success should not have been often repeated, and in any case the anachronism was not likely to be detected.

‘ Why not make your Dantesque group

complete by getting Jack to figure as the Divine Poet himself?' asked Mrs. Aylmer's satirical adviser, smiling grimly at the contrast between Saxon Jack and the passionate - eyed, hungry - souled wanderer through two worlds—the actual one beneath our feet, and the land wrapped in silence towards which he turned his thoughts—
'nel mezzo del cammin' di nostra vita.'

Major Aylmer, in reply to his mother's suggestion, shortly declined to make such a fool of himself, and looked much more suitably encased in the warlike attire of a Knight Templar. Sally, even masked, made a charming Duchess of Devonshire, and was readily recognised by her friends, though her usual flow of words had deserted her, and she was silent and *distracted*.

'Sally is regularly handicapped by that

mask ; she seems afraid to speak,' observed a strange-looking figure meant to represent a bottle of champagne, and containing one of the Oxonians, to Claud, who was disguised simply in a scarlet domino and mask. Claud crossed the hall to where Sally stood.

'I am Claud,' she said simply. 'Come and sit on the stairs with me, Sally ; I want to speak to you.'

Up the stairs accordingly they made their way, past Purity, indulging in rather lively witticisms with Mephistopheles ; past Marie Antoinette and Goosey-Goosey-Gander, and several other equally incongruous couples. The band played music intended to heighten the effect of the scene, wild and gay, but with an undertone of tenderness. In the hall the brilliant crowd danced, laughed, and whirled about with a buoyancy not

often seen in an English drawing-room. From the stairs Claud and Sally had a perfect view of it all, but it was not for that reason Claud had elected to come there. Masked balls were not an absolute novelty to her, as they were to Sally, who had never even beheld a fancy ball, and who gazed bewildered at the throng. Among them one figure stood solitary, watching Claud.

‘Sally, I have something to tell you. I hope you won’t be angry, and you mustn’t scream or make a fuss,’ said Claud.

‘I won’t,’ replied Sally simply. ‘What is it, Claud?’

‘When some one dressed as a troubadour comes and speaks to you, you needn’t mystify or distrust him; he is a friend.’

‘But what friend?’ Sally’s voice quivered a little.

‘Your best friend, as I believe; he is my friend too, and I have asked him here. If you would rather not see him, say so; but if you wish to reconsider the answer you gave him in the barn under your mother’s eye, why——’ Claud paused for a moment. ‘This is the last chance I shall ever have of doing you a friendly turn, according to our compact; and that is another reason why I brought you here, Sally, to say good-bye.’

‘Good-bye,’ echoed Sally stupidly. ‘Oh, Claud, is there anything wrong?’

‘Yes, there is; a very great wrong,’ said the young voice sternly.

‘I feared it when Mrs. Crosby went away. I have felt for days that something strange was going to happen,’ whispered the girl, whose sympathies were more acute than those of most people in these careless days. ‘But, Claud, must you go?’

‘Yes, I must; and I can never come back again. You will hear all sorts of stories about me, Sally; but I want you to believe in me. I could not help myself.’

‘I do believe in you, and I always shall,’ said Sally stoutly. ‘It will not make the slightest difference to me what people say.’

‘Yet you will find my whole life has been a deceit; but there has been nothing in it to make me unworthy of your friendship. Think kindly of me, my friend—and good-bye.’

‘Oh, Claud, must you go?’ said Sally once more, piteously.

‘Yes, I must, and at once, for here comes our troubadour—Richard’s indefatigable Blondel—only this one seeks his Queen.’

And with a parting wave of the hand, and a laugh, that hid a very real heartache

Claud ran lightly down the stairs. The Knight Templar heard the laugh and watched the light figure, and a mixture of bitterness and astonishment welled up in his heart.

‘I suppose no man ever can understand a woman,’ he soliloquized. ‘This girl must know that there is at least a risk of discovery, and yet she is as gay and careless as a sparrow. I suppose women can jest with their heads on the block, and laugh lightly at the idea of honour and truth. But Claud seemed different.’ That word ‘seemed’ had never occupied so great a portion of Jack’s thoughts before. What was real and what was seeming only? Could a woman be true, purely for truth’s sake? Was it possible for a woman to understand what honour meant? Jack could not enjoy the ball, though Claud

appeared able to do so ; he did not dance, he did not even exchange jokes or common-places in a feigned voice with other maskers, or show the slightest curiosity as to their identity ; in fact, when the time for unmasking came, nothing excited more surprise than the discovery that the silent Knight Templar was cheery Jack Aylmer, very much in disguise.

He could not know that after much doubt certainty is so great a relief as to be almost a joy. He did not know that Claud had so arranged and prepared her plans that she could not draw back now, even if she had wished it. The bitter trial was very nearly over ; the false life would be cast aside almost as soon as she would cast off her mask this evening—to-morrow she would be free. But one more painful scene. To her who had endured so many

this seemed not much ; and then she would go forth and leave all this shame behind her, and make a new life, fair and honest, for herself. The last night in the old place ! These words seemed to mingle with the music sometimes, and sent a swift shiver of pain through her ; but she thrust the thought aside resolutely, and gave herself up to the merry madness of the hour.

Meanwhile we have forgotten Mrs. Brand, and she was not an individual to allow herself to be overlooked for long. She had resolutely declined to appear in fancy costume : she would only dress as a ' lady of the nineteenth century '—which some people ill-naturedly considered to be itself a ' fancy ' character for her. She very greatly disliked the masked part of the ball. After supper it would be all right ; but during these two hours previous to that

magic twelve o'clock she endured torture. She could not keep an eye on Sally, try as she would. Of course her daughter's costume was no secret to her ; but she had no idea who her daughter's partners might be, and she wearied her soul to find out—in vain.

At last she missed Sally from the ball-room, and determined to go in search of her ; so she arose and went forth. The child had complained of headache, and finding her large Gainsborough hat heavy and inconvenient, she had deposited it on her mother's lap while she danced. Mrs. Brand, feeling sure that Sara would be found out of doors, put the hat on her own head as a protection from the night-dews, wrapped her white lace shawl more tightly round her, and proceeded in the direction of the Dutch garden.

As a white owl carries consternation with it in its slow, midnight course, so Mrs. Brand disturbed several pairs who were quietly flirting on the terrace, and who looked after her with anything but amiable eyes; then remembered their masks, and smiled again.

Mrs. Brand had the reputation of having a singularly evil tongue, a possession as fatal to the popularity of its owner as the much-dreaded evil eye. She scanned each group with much self-possession and *sang-froid*, but nowhere did she see the trim little figure clad in the well-known costume.

Mrs. Brand, however, was not daunted. She was determined to find her daughter, and to that intent she walked down the paths of the Dutch garden, looking right and left as well as the box-hedges would allow.

Suddenly her promenade was brought to

an abrupt ending. A young man vaulted lightly over the box-hedge, clasped the astonished matron in his arms, and murmured in a rapturous undertone, 'My darling—at last!'

Horror kept Mrs. Brand silent for one brief moment, then her terror became audible in a prolonged squawk, for the sound can be described by no other word. The effect on the troubadour was galvanic. He unclasped her waist even more quickly than he had clasped it, and he stood gazing at her, rooted to the spot.

'Who are you, sir—and what do you mean by this conduct?' gasped the insulted British matron.

'It was a mistake, I assure you. I never meant—it was the hat,' faltered the troubadour incoherently, and very foolishly.

‘The hat!’ shrieked Mrs. Brand, seizing the fabric with her hands, as if to make sure of it. ‘I see it all. You had an appointment here with my daughter; and you—yes; I know your voice—you are Harry Johnson!’

Let us draw a veil over the scene that ensued, and merely say that Harry did not again appear in the ball-room, nor did the troubadour unmask at the supper; but the wanderer had to wander forth again, and ‘O Richard, O mon roi!’ might have been heard on the way to the railway station, if the youth had the heart to sing it, which was not probable.

As for Sally, she, too, disappeared from the ball-room, her headache becoming a very real one, and silence and darkness the only boons she craved.

The hour so long waited for had come at

last ; the guests had assembled in the supper-room, had cast aside their masks, and raised their glasses as the twelve strokes of the clock sounded through the sudden silence. The scene was dramatic ; but she who had planned it was not there to enjoy it—there had, indeed, been a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip for her. As the last stroke sounded the toast was given — ‘ Long life to the owner of Aylmer ! ’

Claud had expressly stipulated that there should be no speech-making ; so all that was required now was the ‘ easy acknowledgment of bows and smiles. But Claud never did exactly meet the requirements and expectations of others. She spoke a few words ; and those few words were not at all what anyone else would have spoken on an occasion like this.

Decidedly Claud was enigmatical and eccentric—if not a little mad.

‘In the name of the master of Aylmer, I thank you all for your good wishes,’ she had said; then, looking at John Aylmer, she added: ‘I, too, wish long life and happiness to the master of Aylmer.’

A strange thrill passed through John Aylmer’s veins as he met that glance and heard Claud’s words. He had misjudged her: that look told its tale clearly to him who knew. Had he not known the story, and had he been at leisure to observe the look—probably, under ordinary circumstances, he would have been too much occupied with the bright eyes round him to notice Claud at all—but if he had observed the look, it would have puzzled him by its wistful appeal, the sadness of one who renounces; and yet, through all, there

shone some light of triumph and of victory. Jack, for the first time in his life, felt thoroughly ashamed of himself.

Soon after supper, Claud had disappeared, first whispering to Major Aylmer :

‘Keep the ball going, Jack ; I have business I must attend to. When it is all over, wait for me in the library ; I want to speak to you.’

Claud went into the business-room, where she signed several papers, having summoned the butler and Jones as witnesses. Some of these documents she handed over to the old coachman, with minute directions as to the disposal of them ; the others she gave into the charge of the family lawyer. All knew that something strange was going on ; but Claud gave no explanation.

All was over now, and could not be undone, even if she had wished it. Indecision was over : nothing remained but the shame of confession, and the bitterness of going forth alone into exile. Her heart was young and brave ; but, for a time, desolation and utter loneliness overpowered her. She went upstairs into the quaint old room which had been her nursery, and she cried over some of the old treasures that she found there, like a child.

CHAPTER XXI.

CONFESSION.

THE guests had all gone, the lights burned in a feeble, dissipated manner, as though conscious that the day was dawning outside ; for it was about four o'clock, the most miserable hour of the four-and-twenty to most people, and Jack was waiting in the library for his cousin's coming, in as utterly unhinged a state as even Mrs. Crosby could have desired. Of exultation or triumph there was not a trace ; he looked singularly unlike a man about to receive the news that an inheritance was his. As a matter of fact, that did not occupy his

mind at this moment ; he thought of Claud, and of how he had misjudged her, and he wished with all his soul that it was in his power to save her the pain of this confession. Should he write a line to tell her that he knew, and leave it on the table ? But was it fair to Claud to take it for granted that she meant to confess ? even yet he might be mistaken.

While he was debating the point in an agony of indecision and nervousness, the door opened, and Claud stood on the threshold. In her soft white draperies she looked, what she was, a pure and noble woman. Her small head was half shrouded in a white lace cloud, which she had twisted round it, trusting, perhaps, that it would give her confidence ; though it did not hide her face, but only her short, fair hair. Very pale, with her eyes cast down, she stood

there, 'crowned and clothed with humility,' the fairest woman her cousin had ever seen. Too much abashed to speak, Jack stood and gazed at her as at a vision. The silence growing unbearable, Claud tried to raise her eyes and speak; but her shyness overpowered her. She had gone through so many emotions of late, that they had to a certain extent counteracted each other, as the bright colours of the prism mixed together produce neutral tint; and now nothing was left but this overpowering shyness. She was not used to this woman's dress, and she felt she could not bear to see her cousin's astonished eyes fixed on her. Though she tried, she could not look up. Slowly the blood mounted to her forehead, till her lovely pale face was one blush. Her confusion recalled Jack to himself.

‘Good God! how like you are to your father!’ he exclaimed, as he came towards her, took her hand, and led her to a chair.

Jack had never been celebrated for tact, but for once his kind heart had taught him the right thing to say. Claud raised her eyes at once, and smiled. She was not an impostor and an outcast; she was one of them—an Aylmer—in her father’s house, and this man was her kinsman. Claud was not self-conscious by nature; she was, in fact, singularly free from this provoking turn of mind, and she thought no more of herself or her costume. She took the chair he had placed for her. Her limbs trembled so that she could scarcely stand, and as the remembrance of what she had to tell him stole over her, she grew deadly white once more.

‘Jack, I have come to tell you,’ she said, with a painful effort, her words sounding far off to herself, and indistinct to the listener who stood close to her—‘to ask you——’ again she hesitated.

‘Do not tell me anything,’ said Jack quickly ; ‘I know already.’

‘You know!’ echoed Claud, looking at him with startled eyes. ‘How can you know?’

‘Mrs. Hankey told me—curse her!’

The last part of the sentence Jack muttered between his teeth. Human nature—especially the female part of it—is contradictory ; it had almost killed Claud to resolve on telling this story, yet now she found that there was no necessity to do so, her first feeling was one of disappointment. Her renunciation was of no value ; the result would be the same even if she

had not made up her mind to sacrifice everything for the love of right.

‘Why did you not tell me?’ she asked, coldly. ‘You would have saved me much doubt and pain—and much humiliation.’

‘I never should have told you. If you had not spoken, I should have remained silent about it till doomsday. It rested with you. You were the victim of this conspiracy, not I. But, Claud, I thank you.’

‘Thank me!—what for?’ asked the girl, bewildered.

She did not know where they had got to ; nothing was as she had prefigured it. Is not this always the case? Does any great event of our lives happen to us as we have imagined, in picturing the coming scene, it will happen? An important matter is settled in an utterly common-

place manner ; while some sudden tragedy starts up in the midst of our everyday life, and scares us by its passionate intensity.

‘Do you thank me for keeping you out of your inheritance?’ said Claud.

‘I thank you for showing me, when my faith wavered, that truth and honour and courage do exist. To you—a young girl, so utterly alone—the way must have been almost insurmountably difficult, yet you have not shirked. Tell me, Claud, were you frightened?’

‘Yes, I was frightened, and I am so still. It feels a little dreary to go out into the world alone, you know ; but better that than a false life. It came into my mind when I was quite little that I would be true, and I suppose God helped me. There is a God, though Judith would tell me nothing about Him.’

‘Yes, there is a God, and natures like yours will find Him. Even Voltaire acknowledged the necessity. “Si Dieu n’existait pas, il faudrait l’inventer.”’

Jack had wandered to the fireplace, the true Briton’s refuge in all times of perplexity. There was, unfortunately for him, no fire, the knocking about of which is a relief to embarrassment; but he found a solace in the flaring candles. With a spill he constructed gutters and opened sluices, and did much engineering on a small scale, greatly to the detriment of his material.

‘Good-bye, Jack,’ said Claud, rising, and going towards him with her hand out. ‘As you know all about it, there seems nothing more to be said; only, before I go I should like you to say you forgive me.’

‘I forgive you freely,’ said Jack, taking her hand, ‘for a crime in which you had

no share, and from which you have been the chief sufferer. But, Claud, must you go?’

‘If you will think for an instant, you will see that I must. There would be an inquiry—perhaps I might be tried for this fraud and conspiracy. I restore the property; I injure no one by my flight. I must go—and at once.’

‘Could not the matter be arranged somehow—be hushed up?’ asked Jack weakly. ‘It concerns no one but you and me. It gives me no satisfaction to think that you are roaming all over the world while I repose here in comfort.’

‘It cannot be hushed up, even if you could seriously wish me to go back to falseness and concealment. The truth shall be known this day. I have written to two magistrates, and to all the principal tenants.

As soon as I came of age I signed the papers in the presence of witnesses. It cannot be altered now if I wished it, which I do not: the pain of it is over. In case there should be any difficulty, I got Mr. Marks to draw out a deed of gift of this place and property. I signed that to-night also, and gave it into his charge. He will deliver it up to you to-morrow.'

'Why did you not give it to me yourself?' asked Jack.

'Because you are so impetuous, Jack,' replied Claud, with the faintest gleam of a smile. 'I thought you might put it in the fire.'

'I think I might,' said Jack, rather grimly.

He felt savage at the idea of robbing this slight, young girl.

'There is something laughable about it—

giving you your own property in this formal way,' said Claud, and the smile found its way into her eyes, usually so sad.

Jack did not respond.

'I don't find it amusing, somehow,' he said shortly. 'There is nothing very comic to a man in taking a girl's property and driving her out into the wilderness.'

'You mustn't look at it in that light, Jack. The property is not mine; in any case I have no right to it. If it were not yours it would be Judith's. And—I am going to Italy!'

'What are you going to live on?' asked Jack brusquely.

'I shall be an artist,' said Claud, with a glow on her young face and an upward movement of her head.

'Nonsense!' was Jack's rather brutal response.

His heart was perplexed by many new emotions, and the outcome of it was that he was surly.

‘Prosperity has not improved your manners, Cousin Jack,’ retorted Claud, flushing slightly and holding her head higher, as a sign that she did not appreciate rudeness.

She was quite at her ease now, more so than she had ever been in her life before, now that her feelings and her words and her dress were in unison.

‘I beg your pardon—I don’t know what I was thinking of. My brain is in such a confounded whirl,’ said Jack, with real contrition. ‘I know you are a clever artist—but the idea of a girl like you fighting your way all alone in the world——’

Jack broke off abruptly, and turning, busied himself once more over his candles ;

but not before Claud had caught the gleam of a tear in his blue eyes. She was sorry for Jack's discomfort, not for her struggling artist's life; but she was not much surprised. Her cousin was the kindest-hearted fellow alive, and she could understand his feelings.

‘Don't take it like that, please, Jack,’ she said, putting her hands on his shoulder in her frank kindness. ‘I shall get on, and be very happy—happier than I have ever been. I dare say it seems horrid to you to turn a girl out of her home; but I go of my own free will, and Italy is more my country than England, after all. And, Jack, if it will make you any happier you can send me the money mentioned in my mother's settlements, and then you will know I am not starving—since you don't believe in my art.’

Jack turned round suddenly, so suddenly that Claud was almost in his arms. She took her hands from his shoulder hastily, and drew back a step ; but Jack caught the descending hands in his, and held them tightly.

‘ I do believe in your art, and in you so utterly, Claud, so thoroughly, that I want you for my wife. Don’t leave me, darling ; stay here with me in the old home which is so dear to you.’

To Jack’s horror Claud turned as white as the dress she wore, and the hands which he held so tightly grasped in his grew colder and colder. He thought that she was going to faint, and he cursed himself in his heart for his rough wooing, as he led her to a chair. He had terrified her by his suddenness. How could she guess at the love which had been growing in his heart

as he had watched her the last few days ?

Claud did not faint; but she did not speak. She seemed stupefied.

‘In Heaven’s name, what is the matter ? Claud, speak to me. Have I frightened you ?’ asked Jack penitently.

For all answer, Claud covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. Jack was in despair. He had been abrupt certainly, but he could not account for her grief. At last the sobs ceased. Claud rose from her chair and motioned Jack away from her with the dignity of a young queen.

‘I am sorry that we cannot part as friends. I am sorry to lose a friend—I have so few. I thought you would have understood me, Jack; and I did not think you would have insulted me.’

‘Insulted you! What can you mean?’ asked poor Jack blankly.

‘You have thought as Judith did.’

‘That I dare swear I have not. What did Judith think?’

‘She thought, she said, that my motive was not love of truth, but——’ Claud hesitated painfully, and for the first time coloured hotly.

‘Love of me!’ Jack finished the sentence with a rather bitter laugh. ‘Let me reassure you, Claud, Judith’s thought and mine had not the faintest resemblance. What a brute she was to say such a thing to you! Why, it is your honesty and truth and pluck that make me feel for you as I never felt for a woman before!’

‘Is it?’ said Claud, brightening perceptibly. ‘I am very glad to hear that, Jack. I am very glad to find people can

believe the simple truth. Judith did not. She liked something complex. It was horrible to me that you should misjudge me. I felt stifled. I am very glad to find that despair and tears were quite uncalled for.'

'You seem supremely blessed in the knowledge that you have no love for me. I wish I could share in your happiness, but it does not strike me in quite the same light,' said Jack grimly. 'Don't be in such a hurry to go, Claud. Sit down and let us talk things over quietly.'

'I don't think there is anything more to talk over. I shall write to you occasionally, Jack,' said Claud cheerfully. 'It is such a relief to me that it is all comfortably settled. I shall go away with quite a light heart now.'

'Comfortably settled!' echoed her cousin.

‘Do you know that you have given me no answer as yet to the question I asked you. You nearly fainted, and then you cried and then you scolded me for Judith’s thoughts, and all the while I only wanted one word. Don’t talk about going away, darling—promise to remain here with me in the old home.’

Jack longed sorely to take the girl’s slender hands in his, to breathe more passion into his wooing; but he feared to frighten Claud from her calm friendliness, and he studiously made his voice as unemotional as he could.

‘Jack, it is very generous of you, and very kind; but I would rather you had not thought it necessary to say that.’

‘Necessary!’ gasped Jack, gazing blankly at the clear eyes turned towards him.

‘Yes; I suppose it was necessary to

you because you are generous. You do not like to accept anything without offering to share it. I have seen some children like that. And then you are strong, and you think I am weak, and so you are sorry for me. But I assure you I do not feel myself an object for pity, now with my life before me.'

'My God!' muttered Jack, as he jumped to his feet and walked towards the fireplace.

It was rather hard on him. First, Claud assumed that his love was offered because hers had been given, then that it was simple generosity which moved him; first he had terrified her by his abruptness, then his studied calmness had been attributed to friendliness. The reality of his love for her had never even crossed her mind as yet. He would make her understand

that, at all events ; women generally realized that sort of thing very readily. His voice was harsh and abrupt when he spoke ; he was too much moved to woo tenderly.

‘ You take a very extraordinary view of all this ; you look at it from some imaginary standpoint of your own. Does it seem so very impossible to you that I should *love* you ?’

‘ Yes, it does,’ said Claud, clearly and coldly ; ‘ I have no sympathy with such sudden ideas. You can forget it as quickly as you have imagined it. I would rather you talked about something else.’

‘ Mine is not a sudden passion ; I have felt *that* scores of times, but I never felt towards any woman as I feel towards you. What can I say to convince you ?’ said Jack desperately, coming up to where

she sat, and looking at her more angrily than tenderly. 'Does it seem impossible to you that a man should love you? Have you no heart—have you no vanity, even? By Heaven, I have never seen a woman like you before!'

Claud looked up at him reproachfully, and her eyes filled with tears. Jack threw himself on his knees beside her.

'Forgive me, darling! I didn't know what I was saying. You make me mad by doubting my love for you. After all, I never have seen a woman like you, not one so true, so noble, so free from little tricks and vanities. But I want you to try to understand. I don't love you because you are alone, because you have made a great sacrifice, because you need love. Men don't love for reasons, though they may be excellent ones ; they love for no reason

at all. Cannot you understand that you are a woman to be loved, passionately—desperately?’

Jack had risen to his feet in his excitement; his voice was hoarse and hurried, his face was white, and his eyes were fixed on Claud's. The pain and passion in them seemed to be understood by her at last; her nature was sympathetic, and the emotion with which the air around them seemed to vibrate, quivered through her with a sudden shock. She rose to her feet, and put out her hands to this man who loved her.

‘I do understand, and I am sorry,’ she said simply. ‘It seems very sudden and very terrible; I never thought it was like that. I have had so many other things to think about, you see. What can I say to comfort you, Jack? I would

say anything—only not that. Even if I loved you——’

‘Then say nothing,’ said Jack, as she hesitated ; ‘for there is nothing else I wish to hear.’

He turned from her with an impatient, despairing movement ; but she clasped his hands more firmly with a gesture that was almost passionate. Though, as she truly said, she did not love him, she had only two friends in the whole world, and this was one of them.

‘It is you who do not understand, now,’ she cried, in utter perplexity, and with a sound of tears in her voice. ‘This is impossible. I should not believe in myself any more if I married you, and no one else would believe in me; but that would not matter so much. The taint of a crime clings to me; I must go out into the world

and work, and pray, till I lose the memory of it in my new life. I should renounce your love and leave you, Jack, even if I loved you—loved you devotedly, unceasingly—all the rest of my life.'

'For Heaven's sake don't talk about loving me when you don't do it!' cried Jack. 'But I do believe it wouldn't make any difference if you did. Women like you, with noble, generous natures, are so deadly fond of sacrifice. It's hard on those who love them, though.' He drew her close to him and whispered passionate words into her ear. 'Darling, I love you so well that, in the end, you may perhaps relent and think I have suffered pain enough. Leave me a little gleam of hope. Some day—not for a long while—in Italy——'

'No ; you must not follow me to Italy.

And, Jack, I shall not write to you, and you must not write to me. You must forget me—I mean it. Good-bye, Jack.'

She was very nearly crying, but she struggled bravely to keep her voice steady. She was so sorry for Jack. She raised her head and kissed him with her trembling lips. Jack remembered that kiss as long as he lived. It seemed to calm the tumult of anger and passion that had raged in him; and he kissed her tenderly, but reverently as Love the pilgrim kissed the dead lips of Beatrice, while Dante gazed and was comforted by the vision that was his life.

'The day has dawned,' said Claud, drawing aside the curtains and letting a golden flood of light into the room. She put out the flaring candles with a sigh of relief; and she glanced, as she passed, at the masks

and dominoes strewn about the room.

‘Good-bye to concealment, and falseness,
and misery. Be glad for me, Jack. I am
going out into the light of day.’

PART II.



CHAPTER I.

ROME AND RETROSPECTION.

Two years had passed, and Claud had illustrated the truth of the proverb that all roads lead to Rome. She had not carried out her plan of going directly to Italy. As she left Aylmer in the summer, comfort pointed to a cooler latitude than the sunny South ; but what influenced her far more strongly was the idea that her cousin might, in spite of her commands, follow her to Italy. Although she was a woman, she really meant what she said, always ; and she wished most sincerely that Jack would forget her, and recover from his heartache

speedily. Knowing absolutely nothing about the matter, she concluded that so sudden a passion would be quickly forgotten, and that 'out of sight' would very soon end in being 'out of mind.'

So she would not write to him, or allow him to write to her. The intervening time she had spent in Germany, at first in Hungary, and other remote districts, where she felt safe from pursuit. Then she grew bolder—she ventured to more civilized regions ; but still it must be owned the time had passed slowly. Hers was so lonely a life, especially for one of her years. It requires some courage even in a middle-aged woman to go forth and face the world alone—with no family ties, with no friend ; but for a girl such a life is unnatural, and would be insupportable except to one endowed with an unusual amount of courage,

unselfishness, and mental energy. She was so terribly alone. Conscious rectitude should have supported her, and no doubt it did give her a feeling of satisfaction when she remembered it ; but an abstract emotion was rather cold comfort for a loving young heart which longed for those quiet family ties enjoyed—and frequently little appreciated—by other girls. How often tears rose to her eyes as she watched, in some café garden, contented little groups of brothers and sisters ranged round some neighbouring table, laughing at each other's far from brilliant jests, exchanging dainties, having literally all things in common, including past life and future hopes, and occasionally indulging in those rude remarks only ventured on by near relations. Claud knew no one well enough to allow herself the luxury of rudeness. So she pined a

little, though she was free ; but yet she was very far from being unhappy. After the life that she had led, it may even be said that by contrast she was absolutely happy now ; especially after one most memorable day, when Nurse Baker unexpectedly appeared, having escaped from Mrs. Crosby, and obtained—it is to be feared by a free inspection of Judith's letters—an address which led finally to the discovery of her darling. The old woman was intensely proud of this feat ; the reproach of helplessness had been taken away from her, and, even more than this, she no longer felt the remorse which had consumed her for having deserted her child. She had had great difficulties to overcome, for, though she had plenty of money, her knowledge of geography and languages was equally slight ; however, with the help of good-natured fellow-

passengers and impatient officials, the goal had been reached at last. She had, at least, rather more definite information to go upon than the 'Gilbert' and 'London' of Thomas à Becket's Eastern mother; but it is to be doubted whether even that romantic young woman's heart was more firmly set on finding its beloved than was the poor old nurse's.

Claud longed for Italy with all the fervour of those who have lived much in that enchanting land. She turned towards it, too, with all the enthusiasm of an artist. Art stood to her in the place of Love, and in the friendly, genial companionship of fellow-artists she would find a substitute for the social family life which she had never enjoyed. She might get inside this charmed circle, and be a unit in it, as other girl-artists were—rather insignificant

units, perhaps, but Claud wished to be 'like the others.' This was her ambition—to be one of a crowd, neither cleverer nor more gifted than her neighbours ; she did not wish to be set apart in any way—the isolation of genius repelled her. Her own childhood had been so desolate that it had given her a distaste to the idea of even mental solitude, and she would have preferred being in the valley with merry girlfriends to being on the heights by herself. From which it may be inferred that though Claud had much real love of Art and considerable talent as an artist, she was without that wonderful spark of genius which throws its own light on a life and dominates all ordinary passions ; each emotion serving but to feed the flame, which, after assimilating it, sends it forth again with the glow of the fire on it, while the world,

recognising it, wonders at the vivid truth and at the strangeness of it.

Rome is the place where artists, who seek companionship in Art, love to dwell, and to Rome Claud had come ; to Roma Vecchia, for Claud shunned new Rome, with its Haussmann rows of houses, its stuccoed blocks of brick and pretence, its squares and terraces, its Via Nazionale and Via Cavour (the very nomenclature of the new city was an offence to her), and clung closely to the old city, the Rome of her childhood. Her wish for friends in art had been realized ; many artists had taken an interest in, and had been kind to, the quiet English girl, who worked so hard and talked so little. Of her past life she never spoke ; but this reticence did not damage her among this uncensorious class, who do not keep on the alert to discover evil

‘No need of a spy-glass, me dear, unless ye want to see what’s not there,’ Mrs. Brady, one of Claud’s warmest friends—a kind motherly Irishwoman—would exclaim in confidence to a crony, who had, perhaps, ventured on an indiscreet question. ‘The girl is as good as gold—and better; and if she does hold her purty tongue, sure her eyes speak for her—and small blame to them, when all they’ve got to say is that there hasn’t been a nicer, better-behaved young woman among the artists since Fra Angelico found his wings and went up—peace be to him! And if there was anything quare, would she be dragging about an old sieve of a nurse, just to let it all out in five minutes to the first person who was mane enough to ask her? Ah! no.’

Claud’s generous advocate had lived for many years in Italy; but she was so at-

tached to the land of her birth, though she existed very happily out of it, that she allowed her Irish accent not only to give a flavour to her English, but to peep very evidently out of her Italian—a language in which she was perfectly fluent, but, owing to this peculiarity, somewhat incomprehensible. She was a painstaking and fairly successful artist, and supported herself with ease by her work. She had no one else to support; for though she styled herself variously Mrs., Madame, and Signora, she was a spinster. But as years crept on, and turned her into a middle-aged woman, she had thought it advisable to assume the title without the encumbrance.

‘The masculine form of Mrs. is Mr., of Madame, Monsieur, and of Signora, Signor; but not one of the three within my reach tempted me, me dears. It was chaper to

borrow their titles ; but as I've borrowed it, and don't intend returning it, except when I'm dead, I'll not abuse the cratures.'

Claud had other friends besides the warm-hearted Irishwoman, and one of them had just burst rather violently into a tiny room dedicated to Art under the name of studio, though it possessed none of the requisites, to say nothing of the luxuries, to be found in artists' sanctums of the present day ; and, in point of fact, when Claud drew from a model, she usually availed herself of Mrs. Brady's permission to make use of her studio, which was fitted up with a throne, lighted by a north light, and decorated with the usual mass of picturesque objects. Still, the young girl loved her own little den, and passed many happy hours there.

But we are keeping her visitor waiting much longer than she was in the habit of being kept waiting by anyone. She was extremely pretty, very fragile-looking, beautifully dressed, and the possessor of so unpleasant a voice that, when she spoke, her charm almost vanished—until you got used to it, when it added a piquancy to her beauty. She was, in short, an American.

‘Sakes! how out of breath I am!’ she gasped. ‘Say, Claud—how many steps nearer heaven do you live than the rest of the world? I’ve counted these stairs twenty times, and I always make them different; but then I generally tumble over a blind beggar or two, and that puts me out—and him too. My knowledge of Italian oaths is growing, you bet. Claud, put away those musty bones, and listen to me.’

‘I am listening ; and don’t insult my bones,’ said Claud, with a laugh, as she put away her work, which was more anatomical than inviting to an ordinary beholder, and came and sat in the window with her friend.

It was a climb to her little domicile, certainly ; but when you had once got to the top of your beanstalk, what light, and space, and loveliness shone round you ! At this moment the sun was setting behind the Castle of St. Angelo ; the figure of the Archangel stood dark against the glowing gold, while beside it the great church stretched out encircling arms to all comers. Then the bells of Rome took up the parable, and pealed forth one of their many daily calls to prayer—at this the sweetest hour of the day, which has been set aside as the time of the Ave Maria.

‘Those bells are most as harsh as my voice,’ said the young American. ‘But never mind; you can’t help listening to them—they make you attend. So do I. Now, Claud, I’ve got an invitation for you. I’m going, and you’re coming with me.’

‘Oh no, thank you,’ said Claud hastily. ‘You know I don’t care for society.’

‘Then you ought to. It’s good for you. You wouldn’t refuse Gregory’s mixture because you didn’t like it. Besides, these people are in affliction, and they want me to comfort them. That’s my mission.’

‘Are they Americans?’ asked Claud.

‘No; catch me comforting Americans! They are Italians—father, mother (the grandfather is dead; buried to-day—*hinc illa lacrimæ*), two daughters and a son—capable of consolation.’

‘But, Mas, won’t it be intruding on their grief?’ asked Claud, with clear eyes gazing at the bright heavens.

‘Don’t be uneasy; the Marchese came to my place directly after the funeral, and besought, not to say badgered, me to go—their grief fluctuates, my dear.’ And Mas showed all her pretty little teeth in the most unfeeling manner.

Her name was Thomasina, which she shortened into Mas. She occasionally induced strangers to believe she had been christened Massachusetts.

‘You must come, Claud, if only to play propriety. Durante is going to escort us. I don’t much mind what I do,’ remarked Mas, with perfect truth; ‘but I can’t parade all over Rome alone with him. It wouldn’t matter a pin in America; but in this little one-horse country it would be

thought too awful. Here is Durante—but it is much too soon to go yet.’

The door opened and a young man entered, bowing with the easy grace and absence of self-consciousness so conspicuous in Italians. Durante Donati was a typical Italian, dark, passionate-eyed, gay at one moment and tragic at the next. He, like the two girls, had chosen Art for his career, and he had already made a name; though, in these degenerate days of Italian art, that does not count for much. He examined critically and corrected Claud’s skeleton hand; then, as the twilight grew darker, he came and sat in the window, and watched with the girls the lights appearing suddenly in the streets and the great stars throbbing into sight in the sky. The window was open, for this February night was as balmy as May should be with us, and the air was

filled with the scent of countless flowering trees and shrubs that grew on the Pincian Hill close by.

Durante talked most to the young American, but he kept his eyes fixed on the lovely profile of Claud's face cut clear against the evening sky. A plain woman has a sort of halo, a pathetic touch of romance thrown round her in the twilight; and a beautiful woman is never more entrancing than in this hour of mystery.

Claud was a very beautiful woman, calm and gracious, of a type not often seen. Her eyes had lost their wistful look of appeal; her mouth had learnt the trick of smiling—without bitterness and without the feverish gaiety that sometimes used to come to her in the place of happiness. Her hair had been allowed to grow in all its fair luxuriance, and the sunny coils were wound

in a classic knot at the back of her small head. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about this woman was her utter freedom from all the little arts, all the small vanities and love of admiration supposed to be inherent in every daughter of Eve. Her early life and her artistic Bohemianism both combined to render her unconventional and un-young-ladylike; but Claud was essentially a gentlewoman, and she had an instinct of self-respect which circumstances had forced into an almost morbid prominence, and which demanded and obtained scrupulous observance from all who came in contact with her. Durante might, if he had wished it, have made twenty pretty speeches to Mas, which he dared not venture on to the English girl, who announced so frankly that she detested compliments. So he gazed in silence with a pertinacity which

Claud never noticed at all, but which piqued her American friend.

‘Signor Donati, are you making a study of a head from the round, that you answer so at random?’ she asked, in fluent but incorrect Italian.

The young artist stammered somewhat painfully, as he excused himself:

‘The Signorina Claudia’s head—in this peculiar light—at that particular angle, would make a study——’ he dared not say charming, so hesitated again.

The Signorina Claudia turned her head out of the particular angle, and gazed at him with clear, friendly eyes.

‘Everything is picturesque in the twilight,’ she said, in liquid Italian—the *lingua Toscana* spoken by an English voice—a voice which was Claud’s greatest charm, soft and clear, but with a capacity of ex-

pressing passion lurking in its sweet depths.
'But if you really wish to make a study—
only how would it be possible to see to do
it in this light?'

'Enough of your eternal painting!' cried
Mas impatiently. 'Via! it's past working-
hours, and there are my friends to be
comforted. Andiamo!'

CHAPTER II.

A VISIT OF CONSOLATION.

THE three friends were ushered into a typical Italian salon, very bare, very cold, in some respects very splendid. The floor was of marble of various colours, inlaid with artistic cunning, but productive of chilled feet, and consequently an all-overish feeling of shaking and misery ; the ceiling was painted by hands afterwards famous ; the walls, the marble pillars, the decorated doors, all bore evidence of past splendour ; but the want of fires, of carpets, of easy-chairs and of furniture generally, gave still more convincing proof of present discomfort.

Several other persons seemed to have been seized with the mania for offering consolation, for there were a good many people scattered about the room. Claud drew back a little.

‘Are you sure we are wanted?’ she whispered to Mas. ‘These are probably relatives.’

‘The very reason the Marchesa will rejoice over us. Relatives are *triste*—they know all about it, you know; we don’t, and don’t want to,’ returned Mas, with confidence. ‘Ah, here is the Marchese!’

A small white-haired old man, whose manner of moving can best be described as pottering, hurried forward in an uncertain line, but with much warmth of manner. He bowed rapturously over the outstretched hands of the fair Saxons, giving Donati, with whom he was acquainted, a curt nod.

He overwhelmed Mas with thanks and compliments on the beauty of her conduct in coming to the house of woe, and bringing her angelic friend with her; and he bent down over Claud's hand, which he still held, with such lowly devotion, that it flashed through her mind that he meant to kiss it, and she drew it away with an abruptness that nearly upset the old gentleman's equilibrium.

Seeing that the young angel was *féroce*, like all her nation, the Marchese suggested that he would at once present her to the Marchesa.

‘She is melancholy, poverina; but under the circumstances, what would you? This will be for her a most charming distraction.’

The Marchese did not pretend to be very heart-broken himself: a father-in-law,

an old man whom he detested, and who was by common consent allowed to be unpleasant in his ways, and whose demise brought in a little badly-wanted money—it would be too much, it would be a folly to affect woe. But with the Marchesa it was different, the *convenances* had to be respected. That lady was sitting, the central object of a sympathizing group, with eyes apparently studying the Cupids on the ceiling, and mouth drawn down at the corners. She had distinctly heard the new arrivals enter, though she affected not to have done so, and she was posing now for their benefit.

‘Magdalen in the Desert,’ whispered Mas in English to Claud. ‘Say—where’s the skull?’

Claud had to hide a furtive smile as she was presented in due form to the

Marchesa de' Santi, whose appearance may be briefly described as a harmony in black and yellow—garments and hair black, skin yellow. She dropped her pose, and rose with great alacrity to welcome her guests.

‘Forestiere! how charming! How that is a relief! You have never known—never perhaps heard of our lost one, so to you gaiety is still possible. For me, my heart is broken. I say to myself, “No father—che disgrazia!” But it is a distraction to talk to those whose life is still unclouded.’

Apparently the Marchesa found it so, for she chattered away with much sprightliness. She had once been in England (by which she meant London, and more especially the neighbourhood of ‘Laycestarre Squarr’), and she had as profound a horror of the whole concern—country, climate

and customs—as any of her compatriots could have.

On the strength of her English experiences she would occasionally break out into bursts of that perfidious language, when she became totally unintelligible to both her young friends, who had to make wild guesses at her meaning, and were perfectly thankful when she relapsed again into her native speech.

Sympathizing by this time had got a little out of date, and when music was proposed, everyone seemed to think that a sufficient and indeed handsome tribute was paid to the memory of the departed in the selection of the first two or three pieces, which were of a classical and rather mournful nature; after which Italian feeling reasserted itself, and love-songs pure and simple, or otherwise, were rapturously given

and listened to. One young man accompanied himself on the guitar, while he sang serenades in a charming tenor voice, and cast adoring glances at the younger daughter of the house, who sat near him, looking very demure but not ill-pleased. She was a graceful dark-eyed child—in England she would have been considered so ; but a girl of Juliet's age is, in Italy, a woman. Claud watched the young people with a good deal of sympathy and interest ; they were so young and so handsome and so clever, for the girl was as musical as her lover, and he gazed at her with eyes that made adoration a palpable truth. The young English artist looked at the pretty picture and enjoyed its harmony, which seemed a part of the song, until suddenly a jar arose in her own nerves which made the music of sight and sound out of tune. To speak

more plainly, she felt the unpleasant sensation produced in a sensitive person by a persistent stare. At first she resolved to take no notice, but after another verse or two of the song, she found the situation intolerable ; so, having plenty of courage and not a grain of coquetry, she looked up angrily to see who the offender might be, and discovered a very odd-looking little man bestowing the same adoring glances on her that the serenade-singer was offering up to the young Marchesina.

Claud's interest in love-affairs was purely vicarious. She had placed herself on one side long ago, and never in her day-dreams made herself a heroine of romance, as most girls do. Jack's proposal to her she ascribed entirely to the generosity of his character ; it was too sudden to be anything else. Of course Claud knew that she was fair to see,

and, therefore, when Durante or any of his fellows looked at her, she thought nothing of it ; they were artists, and were studying effects. She did the same herself—in fact, she had just been doing it. In anyone else, it would be an impertinence which Claud would be quick to resent. But on this occasion she did not resent it—she very nearly laughed. The culprit was so very little, and so very odd-looking, that she had to turn her head suddenly and raise her fan to hide a smile—a rather vain disguise, for the temperature of the room was freezing, and not even a cold-loving Englishwoman could have borne any additional draught.

At this moment a page came round with refreshments. He was got up *all' Inglese*, and though a pretty little boy, looked hideous in his buttons. The refreshment

was also 'after the English,' and consisted of very miserable tea, which the takers liberally laced with rum.

'Ma prende, signorina—prende pure,' urged the page, referring to *il rhum*.

He was also a very friendly little boy and entered into the question at length, arguing as to the wholesomeness of the addition when one took such a cheerless beverage as *il tè* when the discussion was stopped by the arrival of the Marchesa with a young man in tow.

'Signorina Claudia, will you permit that I present to you my most esteemed friend, il Principe Biondino?'

A tiny youth appeared from behind the flowing black drapery, and Claud recognised the very little, very odd-looking man who had excited her ire and her mirth a few moments previously.

Unlike most of his countrymen, he was fair—at least, his hair was rather colourless, and very scanty ; his complexion was also colourless, and by no means clear ; he had no moustache or whisker, and merely an indication of eye-brows ; and when he smiled, which he was doing at this moment, a still more remarkable omission was visible—he had no teeth. He looked very young, and yet strangely old ; his face was wizened and puckered ; he seemed to be a blending of the two childhoods. Altogether, Claud thought she had never seen a more extraordinary little man. As he still continued to smile in a conciliating manner, as if deprecating her criticism, she felt it behoved her to ransack her internal resources for remarks of a nature likely to set him at his ease. This was a feat by no means difficult to accomplish, for, like most Italians, he

was not much troubled by self-consciousness, notwithstanding his curious appearance. He subsided into a very stiff and uncomfortable chair by her side, and in five minutes was talking to her as glibly as if he had known her all his life. He informed her that he was an orphan, his parents having been elderly people at the time of their marriage, and having departed this life a few years after that event, leaving the world one copy—himself; that the Marchese had been his guardian—had been, because he was now of age, though perhaps the signorina might not think it; he was, in point of fact, twenty-five, though he was aware he looked any age: people had given him any number of years, from fifteen to fifty. He seemed quite pleased at the generosity of the public. Claud smiled too, being relieved that the necessity of invent-

ing conversation was removed from her ; and found herself taking some interest in this history which so keenly interested her companion.

Presently he came to the very personal topic of his want of teeth ; but here again he evinced no morbid shyness.

‘ Mademoiselle had remarked—she could not fail to do so, as he had no moustache to hide the deficiency—his singular dental omission. He had been born without teeth—most babies were, by-the-way—but they had never since appeared. In one way it had been a clear gain to him—no cutting, no changing, no toothache. But still it looked singular ; strangers were startled by it at first, but it was really remarkable how soon they got used to it. In a few days’ time he felt assured the signorina would quite forget whether he had teeth or not.’

He was so earnest and impressive about it that Claud hastened to set his mind at ease on the point, by the not very original remark that old friends would never regard such a trifle, and acquaintances didn't matter.

'Then, may I consider that we are old friends, Signorina Claudia?' cried the Principino, with such a beaming smile that Claud decided that, teeth or no teeth, his little face was a very expressive one. 'Would she grant him the privilege of friendship, and allow him to call upon her?'

'You must excuse me, Principe; I live alone, and only receive ladies,' said Claud, with decision; but chancing at the moment to glance round the room, she beheld Donati gazing at her with an air of combined surliness and ferocity. 'And—and

artists,' she added truthfully, and feeling furious with herself for blushing a little, in such an uncalled-for way.

'But I am an artist, signorina. I beg that you will not laugh, but that you will believe me. I can bring proofs—ample proofs—of what I say.'

'Then you must bring them to neutral territory, where they can be judged critically,' laughed Claud. 'No, Principe; my rule cannot be relaxed.'

'Then where could one hope to have the happiness of seeing the signorina? In this great rambling Eternal City two friends might go wandering for months without meeting.'

The Principe looked such a disconsolate little man at this sad prospect that Claud. laughed more merrily than before.

Does she frequent the Pincian? No.

St. Peter's, or any particular church ? Sometimes one, and sometimes another. Any gallery? Not at present. It was like a game of cross-questions and very crooked answers that he had been taught by another English lady.

Claud would give him no clue—he must trust to chance ; and, thinking the conversation had lasted long enough, she rose to take leave of the Marchesa, who assured her with much gesticulation that she had found her presence most consoling.

As she left the chilly salotto and chillier staircase and emerged into the much warmer night air, with the magic Italian moonlight lying broad on streets and gardens, Claud breathed a sigh of delight ; but her content was a little ruffled the next moment by Mas, who remarked in English :

‘Well, I hope you enjoyed your flirtation with the Principe—you seemed to.’

‘Flirtation! Mas, you seem to think one cannot speak two words without flirting—even to a boy, or an old man,’ said Claud disdainfully, without defining in which category she placed her new acquaintance. ‘Please leave me out of your list; I never flirt.’

‘Well now, if you ask me,’ said Mas, with much decision, ‘I should say you were the biggest flirt I know—just that. But what beats me is how you contrive to flirt as if you weren’t flirting. Wish I could, I know that. When I flirt it’s painfully apparent to everyone—even a blind man would know.’

‘Possibly—unless he were deaf also,’ retorted Claud, in a spirit very unusual

in her. But she was vexed with Mas; and, though a heroine, she was not an angel, but had a natural and healthy temper.

We see other people out of our own eyes. Mas had devoted the evening to the entertainment of the Marchesino, whom she found very capable of receiving consolation.

Donati was looking at the world mentally, and at the moon-flooded Roman street actually, through somewhat sullen eyes. He was consigning princes to perdition, and finding that society was a snare.

CHAPTER III.

THE COLISEUM BY MOONLIGHT.

FEBRUARY was over, and March was reigning, both in its beginning and ending, 'like a lamb.' This month, so bitter in England, is the sweetest time of the delicious Roman spring; and Claud was enjoying its beauty to the utmost in the flower - starred glades of the Borghese woods, among the blossoming trees of the Pincian Gardens, gazing on the great stretches of tulips and anemones that lay, vivid blazes of colour, on the slopes nearer her home—wandering, in fact, wherever spring seemed sweetest. It was too lovely

out of doors to give up all one's day to the galleries, whose costly marbles struck a chill to the very heart of the student, while the priceless treasures they contain rather oppressed her nerves. The little wind-flowers in the Borghese were worth absolutely nothing, and perhaps for that reason the presence of these insignificant weeds is most exhilarating. Who has not felt gladdened by the sight of a golden streak of cowslips across a field? All young people we should hope, and most older ones, with the exception of a few very inveterate farmers.

Claud was not *fanatica* about art, though she loved it truly; so she only devoted a few hours of these lovely days to study, and spent the rest in wandering about and sketching from nature. Not unfrequently she was joined by the

Principino, whom kind Chance, as he said, had led in the same direction. He did not think it necessary to add that he greatly assisted Fate by means of skilful inquiries of any of the fair artist's friends whom he chanced to meet as he prowled about the neighbourhood of her dwelling. Nurse Baker sometimes gave him the desired information. He and the old woman always had a chat when they met, which involved the exercise of considerable ingenuity on their part ; for the Prince, having learnt English for six months, knew about as many words, and Mrs. Baker's knowledge of Italian was not much greater. However, in some mysterious way, they managed to make each other understand.

The little old youth did not gain much by his manœuvres, after all, for Claud never

went on these sketching expeditions alone, and, provoked by his pertinacity, she left the entertaining of the Prince to her companion, while she gave her attention to her drawing. But the more *féroce* she was, the more attracted was the rather *blasé* noble. He gazed at his enchantress while he listened to the genial Irish-Italian of good-humoured Mrs. Brady. Claud, as a result, perhaps, of her dreamy childhood, had a wonderful power of abstracting her mind from all else but her work ; in five minutes she usually forgot that the small man was present.

‘The Coliseum by moonlight? Yes, we’re going to see it this very night; and why shouldn’t ye come too, since ye want to? Not an artist? Ah, then, half of us aren’t that ; only we pretend, and you don’t. Sure, ye shall come as me friend.’

This title the polite Italian of course considered to be worth all the Art School certificates in Europe ; but he gazed longingly at Claud, in the vain hope that she would second the invitation to the artists' visit to the world-famed ruin. The girl, however, looked at the sunshine and the shade around her, and said nothing, not even noticing the variations in the Prince's claim to artistic merit.

The pillars of the Forum, the triumphal arches, and the Coliseum were so many harmonies in black and white—clear, dark shadow, and a broad flood of light—when our friends and the artists and the Prince met there that evening.

‘This old fabric,’ observed Mas, ‘puts me in mind of a Stilton cheese which you’re most through with. Makes one kinder creebly, too,’ she added, as they left the

moonlight behind them, and passed into the deep shadow of the building.

They seemed to leave life behind, and to be entering into the mystery and the gloom of the far-off ages. A flood of moonlight streamed into the centre of the ruin, and shone full upon the cross—type of the Light that lived in the midst of a great darkness. As they still stood in the shadow, a long line of Capucin monks passed them slowly, chanting melancholy psalms, for it was the season of penance. The darker shadows in the shadow had a weird effect, uncertain, intangible, and indescribable. Mas grasped Claud's hand tightly.

‘You are frightened?’ said Claud dreamily. ‘I find it very like life—only that is more shadowy still. Let us go on into the light.’

Inside the Coliseum there was fasting

and feasting, passionate remorse and light-hearted jesting, penance and pastime, as in life. Some groups of British and American tourists, with the fine disregard for other people's feelings which usually characterizes them in their tramps abroad, were having surreptitious suppers in out-of-the-way corners, the pop of a champagne cork might be heard in the pauses of a penitential psalm, sandwich-papers fluttered at the base of the stations, and loud laughter checked passionate prayers.

‘Queer creatures, these foreigners!’ exclaimed, at the top of her voice, a stout British matron. ‘I do believe they enjoy moaning. Well, they’re welcome to it for me; but I wish they’d get away from here, for they spoil the place, to my thinking.’

She would have been astonished and

aggrieved had anyone suggested to her the idea that perhaps the penitents might indulge in the same aspiration with regard to herself and compeers.

The party of artists, it must be owned, were more inclined to range themselves with the enjoying than with the grieving community ; but they admired the picturesqueness of the latter, and enjoyed discreetly, all but the very young and giddy. One of these, an English lad, and a lover of practical jokes, seized upon Mas as a confidante.

‘ I have a desire, strong as death, and a good deal livelier than life,’ he spouted, ‘ to give that greedy old woman who is devouring pie in that retired corner a turn. Lend me your white shawl, and my desire shall be gratified at once.’

He arranged the shawl artistically, so

that only his eyes were visible; then he skulked behind archways and corners till he got immediately behind his victim, when he relieved his feelings by a sepulchral groan. The old woman looked round hastily, then dropped her pie and jumped to her feet with a scream, and scrambled off to join her party with an activity born of terror.

‘Let’s be off out of this nasty place!’ she cried. ‘I don’t care whether they’re ghosts or whether they’re monks—I’d as soon sup in a graveyard.’

Claud’s feelings inclined more to the penitents than to the merry-makers, and she stole away from the rest of the party, and climbed up to what had once doubtless been a private box on a magnificent scale—the scale in which things were done in imperial Rome. Silence had grown to

be somewhat of a habit with her. Here she watched some German penitents dressed in scarlet, each one with a lighted taper in his hand, going painfully on his knees from one station to another, and offering up the appointed prayers, and perhaps a groan or two of his own mental agony, at each of them. As they passed into the shadowy part of the circle, the torches flamed up wildly, and the scarlet shone out in fitful gleams, red as the sins mourned for; then again the penitents came out into the moonlight, and the restless flaring fires paled under the calm broad ray from heaven, and even the red robes lost their harshness and were softened into a kindlier tint.

‘What made you come here by yourself, signorina? I have been looking everywhere for you,’ said a reproachful voice.

‘It is not even very safe to wander up here by yourself.’

‘Everything is safe enough now in these days of the triumph of tourists,’ responded Claud rather impatiently, annoyed that the little Prince could not leave her alone, even here. ‘I came to be out of the way of jokes and laughter and talk that seemed to me out of place here, where people are praying.’

‘You shall be disturbed by no jokes from me, if you will allow me to stay, signorina,’ safely promised the Principino, who rarely perpetrated jokes even when he was not perched on a ledge gazing at penitents. ‘There is only one theme permissible on such a night, in such a place.’

‘What is that?’ asked Claud heedlessly.

‘Love,’ said the Principino.

Claud looked at him quickly, half-startled; then she laughed.

‘It always seems to me so odd,’ she said, in her clear, passionless voice, ‘the way in which men fall in love, or think they do. I cannot understand it at all. Perhaps you could explain it?’

The Principe rather dolefully considered that he was in a position to explain it most graphically to the signorina.

‘You see,’ she continued calmly, thinking that this was an excellent opportunity for obtaining enlightenment on a subject that had often puzzled her—Jack’s sudden infatuation for her—‘You see, to me personally, such an idea seems simply absurd. One requires time to learn a language, to understand a religion, to choose a friend. Can people love—really—all at once?’

‘And you can ask this of *me*, signorina—of *me* who from the first moment——’

‘Yes, yes—admired me,’ interrupted Claud hastily. ‘That one understands. You have doubtless seen dozens whom you have instantly admired and as quickly forgotten.’

The Prince tried to protest, but his little face became pink and he looked rather foolish—the last result Claud meant to produce. However, she did not notice his confusion, and went on calmly :

‘We all admire what is fair to our eyes, as I admire this flower,’ and Claud touched a ‘flower in the crannied wall’ gently with her slight fingers. ‘But when it is out of sight, I forget it. It has not touched the heart. That is not love ; I do not know what love is, but I know what it is not.’

‘Ah signorina, I have heard your countrywomen are cold; but you are cruel, stony, without pity, capable of killing with a word!’

‘What is the matter?’ asked Claud; she was used to excitable Italians. ‘If you cannot talk quietly I must beg you will rejoin the others, Principe, and leave me here in peace.’

‘No, no; I will be a philosopher. Let me stay here, and I will bury my own feelings.’

‘And pray, do not constantly dig them up again; it is fatiguing. And in considering any question one should keep one’s own individuality out of sight.’

‘Altro! and the question was——’

‘Love at first sight. Do you think that a man—I do not ask you about a woman, for I *know* that she could not,’

said Claud, with young confidence,—‘but do you think that a man could really love in that sudden way, with a love that would last as long as life—fifty or sixty years, perhaps—through riches or poverty, through troubles and separation, even through death?’

The little Italian laughed. He had got over his anger, and was rather enjoying the situation as he balanced himself on his ledge.

‘We others—we Italians—do not think of love after that prosaic English fashion. With us it is a passion, a delight, a delirium, a despair. That it is born in one instant? Yes; a thousand times yes! As for its duration afterwards—how can I tell? We think not of its death: its glorious birth suffices.’

‘It would not suffice for me. That is

just what I thought it was—an unreliable fancy,’ said Claud, half to herself.

‘If mademoiselle still doubts, let her remember “Romeo and Juliet :” the English poet, at least, understood the Italian heart.’

‘There was no time to try their love,’ objected Claud. ‘It was all over so quickly; and Romeo apparently was not of a constant nature.’

‘Ah, but he would have been! We are all inconstant till the grand passion comes; and then everything is changed. We are never the same again. It is like a torrent which sweeps away all the old landmarks. Then comes the new life. You do not understand it. Claudia, anyone can see you know nothing at all about it; and so—what do I know? There is still hope for me, perhaps. Let me be your teacher!’

‘Prince, you have dug yourself up again. You have not kept to the compact,’ said Claud coldly. ‘Let us join the others.’

In silence they went down the crumbling steps and through the ghostly passages. They paused for a moment to let a file of penitents pass them ; and, as they waited, the Prince whispered :

‘Claudia, forgive me ; let me be your friend still.’

‘Yes, my friend,’ answered Claud, with a smile.

At that moment she saw the dark eyes of a penitent fixed on her with a penetrating gaze—the eyes that should have been bent on the ground. This alone was peculiar ; but the expression of these eyes sent a strange thrill through Claud, and the carriage of the woman’s head had

something familiar about it. The penitent passed, chanting slowly like the rest; and Claud reeled against the wall, speechless and horror-struck as though she had seen a ghost.

‘What is the matter? You are ill,’ cried the Prince.

‘No; nothing. I am tired. Will you tell Mrs. Brady it is time to go home?’ said Claud, as in a dream.

‘Claud, that is your voice, though I can hardly see you in the dusk,’ said a well-remembered girlish tone; and two small hands were thrust into Claud’s, and a little white face turned up to hers—Sally’s.

Truly the Coliseum is the place for visions—of despair and joy.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. BRAND AND MRS. BRADY.

THE explanation of Sally's appearance in Rome is a very simple one. After the unfortunate catastrophe of the fancy ball, and her lover's second dismissal, the girl had lost heart and spirit, and, as a natural result, health. She grew more listless and fragile-looking every day, until at length Mrs. Brand, becoming alarmed at her increasing delicacy, resolved to try the effect of wintering abroad.

Change of scene and sunny skies, however, did not seem to have had a marked success as yet; and Claud, when she

emerged from the shadow into the moonlight, was shocked at the appearance of her friend. The small face seemed to have grown smaller, and the eyes larger: the violet lines under them would have rendered any artificial aid, even for theatrical purposes, quite superfluous; and the mouth had acquired a plaintive droop at the corners, which seemed habitual, for it showed even now when she was smiling in her happiness at having found Claud.

Mrs. Brand did not appear nearly so much pleased, and could have found it in her heart to forbid any intimacy between the girls; but she had had rather a lesson with regard to her daughter, and feared to thwart her, unless for a very strong reason. In her daughter's life, and in the girl's health and beauty, her own hopes of social advancement were bound up. She was

quite aware that she was made much of in society for Sally's sake ; and, besides this present advantage, she looked forward to future honour and glory reflected on her through the roseate fortunes of the charming wife of—— Her day-dreams even sometimes reached to a peer ; but, at the lowest, rested on a wealthy commoner.

She dared not thwart Sally, therefore, for fear of thrusting her into what is known as an early grave ; but at the same time she viewed the renewal of this friendship with great uneasiness, and determined, as far as in her lay, to prevent any intimacy with Claud, whom she mistrusted greatly as the friend of Harry Johnson. She would have liked to have snatched her lamb out of danger, and have fled from Rome to the Riviera ; but she was only too sure that her lamb would object to being so snatched,

and was capable of revolting in a most un-lamblike way.

The anxiety of her mind made her manner rather more unpleasant than usual; and Mrs. Brady, to whom Claud had introduced Mrs. Brand, got the full benefit of several very unamiable remarks and innuendoes on the subject of the young artist's past history, which ended by enraging the warm-hearted Irishwoman.

‘And if she is all alone by herself in the world, what then? Doesn't she behave like the angel that she is? and you don't find them in droves annywhere, let me tell ye, since Jacob's ladder was a dream.’

‘Still it is singular to find a young woman without friends.’

‘No friends, is it? I suppose ye mean old friends. She has plenty of new ones—all who know her. And as for the others,

judging from the sample that's just appeared, I should say the fewer the better. What do we care here about Claud's past? She's a good girl and a good artist, and that's quite enough for us. And if she never had a father and mother, that's neither here nor there. Take meeself, madam. I assure ye I don't care a brass button to know Claud's origin or her history—or anny of her old friends either, for that matter.'

'A brass button—what does the vulgarian mean?' said Mrs. Brand, but she said it to herself.

She would not own herself defeated, but she felt that she had met her match in Mrs. Brady, and that it might be more prudent not to provoke hostilities. They had been strolling up the Campo Vaccino, through the beautiful Arch of Titus. They had got

as far as the church dedicated to the saintly brothers, Cosmo and Damian, 'the most learned and perfect physicians that the world has ever seen;' and here Mrs. Brand resolved that they would go no farther. So she waited resolutely till Sally and Claud, who were loitering behind, should come up to them. She was a woman who had the unfortunate property of rousing the tempers of those she came in contact with, and thus never arriving at their best points. Mrs. Brady, for instance, was an artist who knew her Rome well. She was an intelligent woman, and could be an agreeable companion; but Mrs. Brand had drawn out none of her pleasant qualities. She had made her new acquaintance lose her temper and speak rudely; and in the course of a few moments' conversation she had turned a possible friend into a decided enemy.

In the meantime Claud and Sally had been exchanging confidences. Claud had little to tell, but much that she was anxious to hear.

‘Everyone went away that day, you know,’ said Sally. ‘Of course there was a great talk, but it soon subsided. There was nothing more to speculate about, you see—that is what keeps curiosity going. Everything was told, and so it ended. No one thinks of it now.’

‘And Jack?’ asked Claud. ‘How does Jack get on?’

‘That is the strangest part of it,’ answered Sally. ‘I have never seen a man so changed by prosperity. He is totally unlike “cheery Jack Aylmer,” as he used to be called. Major Aylmer, of Aylmer’s Court, is—well, for one thing, he is hardly ever there; and when he is, he is the reverse of cheery.

Absent, unsociable, and occasionally rather cross, those are the adjectives that suit him best now. I have seen more of him than most people, because his dear old mother was miserable about him, and used to ask me to stay with them to "brighten them up." I didn't feel much like emery paper myself; but I was glad to go, to get away from eternal plans and plots for my happiness. And Major Aylmer was so kind, and used to talk to me about—about Harry.'

Even in the moonlight Claud could see the wild-rose colour flush the delicate face.

'Do you never hear anything of Harry now?' she asked.

'No, never. I don't know how he is getting on, or anything about him. His people are very angry with us, and won't write.
• Then I got ill, you know, and last winter

we spent in the Riviera. We saw Major Aylmer several times, which pleased mamma immensely. She has quite changed her opinion about him, by the way. How little she understood what we talked about! Major Aylmer seemed several times on the point of telling me something—about Harry; but then he checked himself, and would speak vaguely about the wonderful way artists get on, in these days. He never remained long at any place in the Riviera; but he used to rush about all over Italy, to Florence, Rome, and Naples. Then he would try the eastern side, ending with Venice and Milan; but nothing seemed to satisfy him or please him. He reminded me of Talbot Champneys in "Our Boys," who thought Italy a second-hand sort of country, with everything in it old and cracked.'

At this moment Mrs. Brand's voice broke on the southern air.

'Sara, my dear, I cannot allow you to walk any farther. You must get into the carriage at once.'

And so into the carriage, which had followed them at a foot's pace, mother and daughter got; but not before Claud and Sally had exchanged addresses and promises of future meetings.

CHAPTER V.

AN R.A.'S LETTER.

‘AND what was the name of the young artist, mee dear, that the poor child wanted to marry? Ah, leave it to me, now, and I’ll find out all about him. Haven’t I friends among the artists everywhere? I’d take some trouble if it was only to serve out that old dragon—still more to keep that pretty little girl here in this miserable world a little longer.’

‘What makes you dislike Mrs. Brand so much? How has she offended you?’ asked Claud, laughing.

But Mrs. Brady had too much tact to repeat the conversation which had hurt her feelings so much, but would probably hurt Claud's far more ; and fortunately Mrs. Brand's reputation for making herself disagreeable at the shortest notice was so well established that no one felt obliged to insist on hearing the actual words before believing the fact in her case.

The Irishwoman was as good as her word with regard to Harry Johnson and his affairs. Before a week was over she entered Claud's studio one morning with a beaming face and an open letter. Sally, fortunately, was not there ; they were to meet later in the Borghese Gallery, where Claud was copying a picture.

'Didn't I tell ye I'd find out all about him, and haven't I done so?' she asked triumphantly, flourishing the letter between

Claud and her drawing. 'Here's proof that I'm a woman of mee word.'

'Yes; but what's in it?' cried Claud, jumping up in a state of excitement unusual in her. 'Is it good news? Tell me quickly, like the darling that you always are.' And Claud bestowed a hug on the gratified Mrs. Brady.

'Well now, if it wasn't good news, sure I wouldn't have the heart to tell ye so. I'd have to hold my tongue, which would be pain and grief to me—or invint, which would maybe come easier. But there is no need now. This is the blessed truth, not even helped out. Sit ye down now, and let me breathe for a minute after your couple of hundred steps. If I might only make capital of them, as they do of going up the Santa Scala, it's a happy woman I'd be when I got to Purgatory.'

Claud did not like to observe to her friend that she was using her voice and lungs quite as much as if she were reading the wished-for letter, so she concealed her impatience by busying herself in getting a glass of wine for her guest, the instinct of hospitality being one of her strongest feelings. She lifted up the large glass flask, adroitly drew off the oil which served as a stopper, with a bit of cotton-wool, and poured out some of the wine—a drop or two on the tile floor, in the true Italian fashion, the rest into a tumbler.

‘Villeggiatori. But would you rather have vino da donna?’ she added. ‘I have Monte Pulciano.’

‘No, no; none of your sweet drinks for me. I prefer a man’s taste in wine. Thank you, mee dear. And now to the letter. “Mee dear old friend and fellow”—ye won’t

care about that, nor all his flummery about the delight of hearing from me. It isn't often I trouble him, to be sure. He is an R.A., mee dear, and has no time for reading rubbish from an old woman. Ah, here it is now :

“The young man you allude to, Harry Johnson, is getting on remarkably well. He has made a sudden start quite lately—within the last year ; has taken a studio in Chelsea, where he has several pictures which are thought great things of among us. Some of them will certainly be in the Academy, and some, probably, will be exhibited in the Grosvenor and other galleries. Of course the verdict of the public still remains to be given ; but I have not much doubt myself that it will be a favourable one. He may not make a hit all at once, but his works show a good deal of force

and originality. There is promise in them. I am the better able to answer your questions, because I know the young fellow personally, and was at his studio the other day. He tells me that the man who has helped him to make this start in his profession, and who has encouraged him in every way, is a"—now, this is the odd part of it, mee dear, for it's a man with the same name as yourself—"a Major Aylmer, for whom he has painted most of the pictures now to be seen in his studio : notably, a clever portrait of an old lady, Major Aylmer's mother ; an old oak interior—the hall of Aylmer's Court ; an allegorical picture, intended to carry out his motto, 'Truth against the world ;' and some mystical ideas made manifest on the new life of love."

'Now, isn't that praise enough for ye,

mee dear? Of course, we must wait till after the Academy—— Why, what's the matter with ye, Claud? ye've turned as many colours as a mackerel in the sunshine.'

'Nothing is the matter; only I am so very glad. And isn't it good of Jack?'

'I haven't a doubt of it. But which is Jack?' replied Mrs. Brady, a little puzzled. 'The young fellow's Harry, and mee friend's Michael. Oh, will it be Major Aylmer?'

Claud nodded, while her Irish friend went on:

'Oh, so he's Jack, is he? And does he really belong to ye, then?'

'He is my cousin, and he and his mother have been very good and kind to me,' said Claud.

'Then that cranky old divil—— I beg your pardon, mee dear, I was thinking of

somebody else,' said Mrs. Brady, whose indignation at Mrs. Brand's insinuations nearly betrayed her. Why had that ill-natured old woman tried to make a mystery about Claud's antecedents? 'And will Major Aylmer be the head of your family, now? And Aylmer's Court, it's a fine place, I suppose?'

'Yes, Aylmer's Court is very beautiful—the loveliest place in the world to me,' said Claud, with a sigh.

'Ah, and ye know 'it well?' asked Mrs. Brady, determined to throw these facts at Mrs. Brand the next time she met her.

'It belonged to my father, and I was born there,' said Claud dreamily, her thoughts back on the terrace.

'But, mee dear, why didn't ye write to your cousin about Harry Johnson? He could have told ye all about him long ago,'

said Mrs. Brady, struck by a sudden thought.

Claud flushed painfully, and hesitated for a moment.

‘Mrs. Brady, I ought to tell you that I have myself given up all communication with my family. It was my own wish—there were some painful circumstances.’

‘Say no more, mee dear. Sure ye’ve got a right to do as ye like, and I’d rather not pry into your affairs. Now, about your friend. Will ye show her this letter?’

Claud was painfully perplexed, and so was her ally. Interference sometimes did more harm than good ; then, again, it was even possible that Harry might not still be constant. Two years had passed ; and two years for some men mean a good many new ideas. Major Aylmer had evidently

been influenced by some of these reasons, and had held back his information.

On the whole, Claud decided that it would be more prudent to be silent, and to wait, at all events, until May, when the criticisms on the pictures would appear. Then, perhaps, she might write to Jack, and find out if his friend's sentiments were unchanged ; but she felt a very strong repugnance to the idea of writing to her cousin on this subject, or indeed on any other.

So she decided on silence, and went to her copying at the Borghese Palace. Sally soon came and stood by her friend's shoulder ; and at sight of the sad eyes and white little face, prudence was thrown to the winds.

‘ Courage,’ whispered Claud, for Mrs. Brand was seldom out of ear-shot. ‘ He is

well, and he will make a name soon. He is fairly on the road to fortune. Believe in him, and be patient—and try to get well, for his sake.'

CHAPTER VI.

LOVE OR DEATH.

BUT Sally did not get better; on the contrary, she got worse. Her nerves and spirits were thoroughly out of order, and this naturally reacted on her delicate frame. The doctors wisely said that her malady was more of the mind than the body, and that the patient required rousing—an office of which Mrs. Brand seemed fully capable, for her combined energy and power of aggravation might have been held to be sufficient to rouse a sleepy hippopotamus of a lamb-like disposition.

But Sally faintly but distinctly declined

to be roused. She would not be dragged to conversazioni or shown off at balls. She didn't care about the long funzioni in the churches. She was tired of the galleries, and she utterly refused to take the usual afternoon drive on the Pincian Hill, where the fashion of Rome contents itself with driving round and round and gazing at each other's bonnets—and the sunset.

The fact is that Sally had taken it into her foolish little head that her lover had forgotten her: he was faithless, as she had heard men generally were—especially when they got on well in the world. This bitterness, which was unlike the girl's usual manner of thought, was working inwardly and affecting her health. As long as Harry was poor, she could believe in him and wait for him; but now that he had fairly started on his career, and still made no sign, what

was she to believe? The result of her worldly mother's instructions had been to give the girl a great distrust of riches. She had seen so many mean actions committed for their sake, that she was very ready to believe that their natural action on a human heart was to demoralize it.

Claud saw with consternation that the result of those few words that she had whispered, hoping to cheer her friend, had had a very different result to what she had looked for. She had done it for the best, but it had turned out for the worst; and she did not see how she could now undo it, especially as Sally did not talk of her sorrows, and Claud could only guess the cause of them. She took her American friend with her one day, thinking that her breezy way of looking at life might freshen up the invalid. But the visit was not alto-

gether a success. The two young women mutually aggravated each other, though it must be owned that Mas showed a good deal of patience in suggesting amusements which she thought might divert the English girl.

‘There’s a fine time coming for people who’ve a good stock of gape-seed to sow,’ she remarked, in her elegant diction. ‘What with Holy Week and Easter: really good shows, and lots of them.’

‘I do not care for ceremonies,’ replied Sally languidly. ‘They tire me, and they don’t amuse me.’

‘Well, I don’t know that they are amusing, though it’s Pagan to say so,’ replied Mas, with rather vague theology. ‘But I’ll tell you what you would find amusing—hunting in the Campagna. You hunt all sorts of things, you know; whatever turns up.’

‘I’m afraid I should have to “run to it,” for our funds wouldn’t, and I’m hardly strong enough for the exertion;’ and Sally laughed a little laugh, as feeble as her joke.

‘I’ll lend you a horse with pleasure. You’re not difficult to mount—you don’t altogether require a weight-carrier.’

Mas, though she elected to be one of them, was not an artist of necessity; it is sufficient to say that her people belonged to Chicago, and that she never by any chance touched sausages, to indicate that her means were very ample for all her wants, which moreover were neither few nor simple.

Sally sat upright for a minute, and her eyes sparkled; then the fire went out, and she sank back.

‘Thank you very much. It is awfully kind of you. But I really do not feel up to the fatigue of it.’

“‘Chi va piano, va sano,’” quoted Claud.
 ‘You must begin with some quiet rides,
 Sally, and get up your strength by degrees.’

‘I should say that it’s the pestiferous air
 of this tomb of all time—it’s this combined
 dust of ages and brimstone that’s disagreeing
 with you. Some of us, meaning the artistic
 set, are going to get a little farther from—
 well, let’s say nearer heaven immediately
 after Easter. In plain American, we make
 tracks for Gensano on Easter Tuesday, and
 I advise you to join the party.’

‘But I am not an artist, and couldn’t
 hope to be received as one,’ said Sally
 hurriedly, a faint colour rising to her face;
 the subject was a painful one to her.

The American mistook the reason of her
 hurried disclaimer, and was rather offended
 by it.

‘Oh well, this is a free country—at least

I suppose it passes for such,' she remarked, as she rose to depart. 'No one need joir us against their will. No doubt artists are a harum-scarum, good-for-nothing, scampish set, unreliable and unprincipled; but with all their faults——'

She was going to have added 'I love them still,' when she was stopped by the look of astonished horror on Claud's face. She made her adieux abruptly and retired, followed through the anterooms by Claud. At the door leading to the public staircase, the girls stopped to take leave of each other.

'I can't say I'm prepossessed by your friend's manners, Claud. I don't call them elegant. She's ill, no doubt, which may make her cross; but why she should flare up like that about the artists beats me. I suppose it's pride.'

‘You are quite mistaken, I assure you,’ cried Claud eagerly. ‘Her feeling was exactly the opposite of what you think : her greatest friend is an artist.’

‘Then why so hurried in disclaiming any connection with them ? It was hardly polite to you or me either, not to mention the unknown friend.’

‘She didn’t mean it in that way,’ blundered Claud, her inveterate truthfulness coming to disconcert her, added to the fear that she had already said too much. ‘I—I can’t explain.’

‘No need to, my dear. I see it all now,’ remarked the astute Yankee maiden. ‘Spoons on an artist—jilted. That’s why she looks as if she’d lost a dollar and found a cent. She’s very pretty, too. What a shame !’

‘I beg you will suspend your judgment

until you know the facts,' observed Claud severely.

'All right, my dear. I shan't say a word. It's a sort of thing I don't understand myself. If I lose one admirer, I pick up another; and I should strongly advise her to do the same. Why, I could spare her two or three, even in this musty museum of a city.'

'That's very kind of you,' observed Claud, with a tinge of sarcasm. 'But Miss Brand has always been quite capable of picking up admirers for herself. And after all, what is that? Admiration is one thing, and love is another; ah! a totally different thing.' Claud had forgotten severity and relapsed into dreaming.

'You seem to know all about it,' observed Mas, with a laugh; then her face suddenly changed.

‘No, I don’t believe you do. You’re just thinking it over quietly, and considering the matter. I was more of a worldly-wiseman at ten than you are now, or ever will be. Good-bye, Claud. Take care of your friend, and let her have her heart’s desire if you can manage it, or I fear you won’t have her here very long to trouble you.’

And Mas ran lightly down the stairs, looking prettier, daintier and brighter than ever in the midst of the gloomy surroundings.

‘What a time you have been,’ said Sally retfully, as Claud returned to the salotto. ‘What can make you like that horrible American, Claud?’

‘I like her because she is warm-hearted and true and generous,’ replied Claud concisely.

‘Yes, she is ; I am sure of it. She was very kind about her horse, and in every way ; and I’m an ungrateful wretch,’ said Sally penitently. ‘But her voice ! Dear Claud, I could not stand her voice ; it gave my nerves a wrench, I assure you, though I’m very sorry to be so stupid.’ And Sally’s eyes filled with tears, partly from weakness, partly from vexation. ‘And, Claud, what made her go off as if I had insulted her?’

‘She thought you disclaimed the idea of being an artist rather too vehemently, I fancy.’

‘Was I vehement?’ asked poor Sally. ‘I meant it the other way. People always seem to misunderstand me now ; they never used to. When I was bright and saucy they laughed at everything I said ; now I seem only to be cross and rude, and people don’t care about me any more.’

Claud drew a chair near Sally's sofa, and took one of the wasted little hands in hers.

'I wish you would not say such things,' she said.

'It is worse to think them, and that is what I do, always. And so your friend thought I despised artists! If she had inverted the sentence she would have been nearer the truth.'

'What do you mean, Sally?' asked Claud, thinking it might be better for the girl to speak out.

'I mean that one artist shows very plainly that he despises me. He has thought my love was too easily won. I ought not to have consented to meet him in the garden that night of the fancy ball, and I ought not to have let him see how glad I was he had come back. But if it is

necessary always to mask one's feelings I would rather be out of this cruel world.'

'But I think you are in much too great a hurry to assume that he does despise you.'

'As long as he was poor I could understand his waiting in silence ; but if you had a sudden and decided success, would you let your best friend hear of it through other people ?'

'But he is waiting to have his success ratified by the public. It would seem like boasting to make a fuss about it until he was sure.'

'But he is sure—of a good deal: that great artists think highly of him ; and are not they the best judges ? Do you not think this is a fact worth mentioning ?'

'He may have a difficulty in getting your address.'

‘Major Aylmer found us out with great ease—and now he knows our address, I believe. My mother generally keeps him informed of our movements.’

‘I hope Mrs. Brand will not mention me in her letters,’ said Claud hastily.

‘You may be at ease. I am sure she will not,’ said Sally drily. Then she suddenly jumped up from her sofa and cried out: ‘Oh, Claud, what am I to do? It gives me such pain—such pain. I would cure myself if I could, but I can’t. I would rather die than live to know he had forgotten me. I would rather die than marry anyone else. There is a horrible man here in Rome who admires me, and mamma hopes he will marry me; but I will never consent, Claud—never. I would rather five hundred times be in my grave.’

The girl was so sensitive and so impres-

sionable that Claud felt very sure that she would be in her grave very shortly if she continued to desire it so vehemently, and if no steps were taken to break the current of her thought.

CHAPTER VII.

A WASTED STAMP.

‘LIKE Elaine! Bathershin! What a simple little mortal to set such store on the opinion of a man! Don’t you ever be so weak, Claud—not that I think it of ye. Take my word for it, mee dear, ye can exist very well in this world without marrying or dying. Look at meself, for instance.’

‘It is not exactly a question of marrying,’ said Claud, trying to explain the vaguer feeling which moved her friend: her truth and loyalty both urging her to make the distinction clear to the more commonplace mind of her Irish ally. ‘Anyone can un-

derstand the shock it would be to find out suddenly that those you believed in were not worthy of belief—that they were unfaithful and disloyal. That might occur between any two friends, and has nothing to do with marriage.’

‘ Indeed and I don’t know that: marriage often leads to the discovery, anny way,’ replied the older and more practical woman. ‘ And one thing I’m sure of, Claud; if your friend goes on with this talk of love and death, and ye can’t contrive to give her tidings of the love, she’ll manage the death for herself. She’s got too much imagination for that bit of a body: it’s a dangerous gift unless ye’ve plenty of flesh to support it; and she’s as fragile as Venice glass. If she takes it into her head to die, she has that much strength and that much weakness that die she will.’

This was Claud's opinion too, and it added intensity to her uneasiness. She was terribly perplexed. It gave her no moral satisfaction to meddle in other people's affairs, as it apparently does many excellent worthies, who seem to draw their motive-power from this source. She was very much afraid of doing harm; and then it was a delicate subject for a girl to write about, and she had had no experience in such matters. She had many reasons for wishing to keep herself in the background of life; her strength had lain in self-effacement, in utter self-denial, and this course had brought her peace. She would prefer to sit still; to watch the life of others with sympathy, but in silence; to take no active part in all these hopes and fears, these loves and hates that disturbed others.

It was not that she would have put her-

self apart voluntarily; if she could have chosen now, she would have preferred to be like others: but Fate had set her away from the rest from the time of her babyhood, and habit had now grown to be second nature. She shrank a little even from ordinary society, though she was not what is usually called shy; but reserve had been a necessity to her for so many years that she could not be expansive all at once like other girls; she could not talk of the fashions and get into the usual glib chatter naturally. Her *rôle* required study, and her nature abhorred acting. This made a complication which resulted in unobtrusive self-suppression. She was by no means unhappy, but she was quiet and silent.

The idea of writing to Major Aylmer was exceedingly distasteful to her. After her strict charge to Jack to forget her, which

he seemed to have obeyed very literally, she could not endure the idea of recalling herself to his recollection. Though Claud found some difficulty in playing the part of a young lady, she was essentially womanly, and it hurt both her pride and her generosity to remind Jack of an episode in his life which was now probably very displeasing to him—the way in which he had come into his fortune. She had greatly given: she did not like to remind her cousin of it, even by demanding a very small favour of him in return.

Her aunt Aylmer would, she knew, do anything to serve her; but that amiable old lady had such a fearful facility in making a muddle of everything she undertook to do, and she was good-natured enough to be always ready to undertake anything, that Claud felt sure that an application to her

for help would be a good deal worse than useless. Yet she could not let Sally die. She knew Harry's address now. Should she write to him direct? She did not know, but she thought that would be always the best plan, and it was certainly the one most in accordance with her turn of mind; but still, if Harry should be unfaithful, or if, after all, he should not succeed in his profession, her interference might only be productive of harm.

She wavered 'trà il sì ed il nò' all that evening, gazing as earnestly at the great throbbing stars as though they could help her; then she put out the classic but dim lucerna which feebly illumined her studio, and entered the tiny room beyond. Judith would have laughed scornfully if she could have seen this little bedroom, the desire of embellishing which had apparently led to

Claud's renunciation of Aylmer Court—apparently only, for the reality lay far deeper, and her disturbance about so trivial a cause was merely a surface-ripple, which showed, however, that the storm was coming.

This little room, meagrely furnished and uncomfortable as it might be, nevertheless did show, as the luxurious apartment at Aylmer did not, the life of its occupant. There was abundant evidence in its decorative effect that it belonged to an artist; in its numerous flowers and knickknacks, to a young girl; and in its devotional pictures and books, to a woman who had, at least, some outward form of religion.

As she looked round the room in the starlight, some vague memory of that other night and Judith's bitter words came over

her. Had she forgiven them? She was not sure: they were words difficult to forgive. The thought of writing to Aylmer had stirred up these old memories. Where was Judith? Could it be—— But Claud tried to stop these uneasy thoughts by going to bed.

By the morning she had decided that she would write to Harry: she had dreamt of Sally lying dead, with the pained look on her face which it wore yesterday; and Claud could not stand the waking belief that the dream might be fulfilled. Right or wrong, Harry should know that Sally was in Rome, and that she was ill. It was very difficult to Claud to write this letter; she was not a diplomatist, and she wanted to say enough and not too much—never an easy task. She was as long about it as some kitchenmaid before the days of school

boards would have been in composing and inditing a letter to a young man ; not in the latter case from lack of matter, or any over-sensitiveness as to the manner of expressing it, but simply from the difficulty of putting thoughts into words at all, and the still greater difficulty of forcing stubborn fingers to form the letters.

At last the letter was done, and Claud issued forth, determined to post it herself. But even when she reached the post-office, she hesitated. All the anguish of doubt came over her once more ; her letter would probably bring matters to a crisis. Should she post it or not ? She hesitated for some moments, and would very likely have remained standing with the letter in her hand a good deal longer, had she not noticed an Italian boy, with a saucy twinkle in his eyes and a broad grin on his face, to whom

her perplexity seemed to be affording the most exquisite enjoyment.

‘Dillo di sì, signorina mia!’ recommended the young scamp.

Claud dropped the letter in hastily, and turned away. How often accident gives the last push, and sometimes in a contrary direction to all our anxious premeditations!

As Claud moved away, a gentleman, coming round the corner hastily, nearly ran against her. He murmured ‘Scuse, signora,’ with a Britannic accent; and Claud, looking at him half in terror, electrified him and herself by gasping ‘Harry!’

It was Harry in the flesh, and in a hurry, and though Claud had turned as white as if she had seen a ghost, she recovered herself in a moment.

‘I am Claud Aylmer,’ she said, seeing that Harry still stared at her blankly. ‘Oh, Harry, if I had only known you were coming, I need not have written! I have this instant posted the letter.’

And Claud looked as though she meditated attempting to get it back again. It was strange that her first idea was of the wasted time and pain she had given to that letter.

‘Have you been writing to me? I was on my way to you. I only arrived in Rome late last night. I knew you were here, and some of my chums have given me your address. You must tell me what was in the letter.’

‘He has come then ; but why waste the stamp, my pretty signorina?’ said the irrepressible Italian, in his own language. He was engaged in ‘il dolce di non far

niente,' and had leisure to watch what passed.

'Let us walk on, and I will tell you,' said Claud.

They walked on, and she told him ; and Harry on his part told her of the doubts that had kept him in England, of the hopes that had brought him to Rome. He knew that the Brands were wintering there ; but he did not know that Sally was ill, and Claud at first did not wish to dash his happiness by ill-news. His only fear was lest Sally might have changed, or Mrs. Brand might not have changed, each respectively, her mind with regard to him.

'My success is still a sort of miracle to me, and I owe it all to Aylmer. He is a first-rate fellow, Claud ; and when I was so down on my luck that I didn't even care to paint, he sought me out and made me come

down to Aylmer, and set me to work. He gave me the first start; and now lots of people have taken me up, and I have become, in a sort of way, the fashion. I hope to get a firmer hold on Art than that before long; and I will, if hard work will help me.'

Now that Claud had time to look at him, she was struck by the alteration the last few years had made in Harry's appearance. At two-and-twenty he had been a boy; at five-and-twenty he was a man, strong and hopeful, and with an air of being determined to get his own way which had formerly been wanting in him. He looked rather more Philistine and a good deal more energetic than in his student-days.

'But, Harry, don't you think you were very rash to wait and make no sign?' asked Claud. 'Sally is so pretty and so much

admired, and Mrs. Brand is a determined woman.'

'Don't you think I've thought of that, Claud? It was that idea that made me lose heart and hope, till Aylmer fished me out of the depths. But remember, my success is young still. I ought, perhaps, even to have waited longer—till May; but I have so many commissions already on the strength of the pictures in my studio, that I could wait no longer. By May they would have left Rome, and I might have had a difficulty in finding them.'

'But a letter——' suggested Claud.

'Mrs. Brand would have been certain to see it, and it would have got the poor child into trouble,' said Harry, with an air of guardian and senior which became him. 'Do not think for a moment, Claud, that I did not want to come;' and Harry laughed

convincingly at the absurd idea. 'I should have started at the very dawn of success—in fact, long before it was prudent or advisable, but that I was detained by the illness of—a friend.'

'Did you nurse him? Has he recovered?' asked Claud, wondering who this friend might be.

'Oh, he's all right again,' said Harry, in the airy way in which men usually dismiss such topics. 'Now tell me, Claud, for this is what I was coming to consult you about, how can I best approach Sally? Shall I brave the old lady in her wrath, and beard her in her den, or shall I speak to the daughter first?'

'That is what I have written to you about. I have something to tell you which you must prepare yourself to hear.'

They had crossed the Piazza di Spagna

and were going along the Via della Propaganda—Harry walking, like a true Englishman, in the sun; Claud, more cosmopolitan yet wishing to keep near her companion, where the sun and shadow meet; while a little behind them came on slowly, in the shade, a tall Italian.

‘You have told me Sally is true—like the angel that she is. What else matters?’ was the selfish and lover-like response of the young artist, little concerned by Claud’s seriousness.

‘Sally’s life matters a good deal—as much as her truth, perhaps—at least to the rest of her friends!’ exclaimed Claud, impatient at his egotism.

But she had not counted on the effect of her hasty words. Harry turned a greyish-white, staggered, and gasped out something unintelligible.

‘Come in here,’ said Claud, laying her hand on his arm.

They were close to the Church of Sant’ Andrea delle Fratte, and Claud drew her companion into the cool dark shade of its entrance, without noticing that an Italian, a little farther down the street, loitered also, affecting to consult his watch.

‘Do not despair. Sally is not exactly in danger; but she is ill—very ill,’ whispered Claud, while Harry clutched tight hold of the rails of a little side-chapel.

The reaction after his warm hopes struck cold on his heart, as the chill in the church after the sunshine in the streets.

‘I am not deceiving you—do not look at me like that,’ said Claud. ‘Suspense and anxiety and—and—not being sure of you, have been too much for her. She was always delicate, you know, though she had

so much spirit. Now that you have come, I think—I hope that she will get quite well. That was why I wrote to you.'

The young man did not look at Claud for a minute or two. He gazed steadfastly at a statue opposite to him, though he did not see a line of it. Save for the absence of the guide-book, the pair looked like ordinary tourists to those not near enough to see the working of the man's face or to hear him murmur, 'My poor little girl, my tender darling!'

Gradually the statue at which he gazed became clear to his troubled eyes. His inward vision had seen Sally dying, and nought else; and the two figures seemed blended together somehow, so that his horrified eyes seemed to see clearly the slight form of his little love lying in marble before him.

‘What is that?’ he muttered hoarsely, pointing to the statue and clutching Claud’s arm.

‘Miss Hosmer’s statue of a young English girl, Miss Falconet: it is her tomb,’ answered Claud as calmly as she could; for she was thoroughly frightened, and thought Harry must be losing his wits.

‘Come away; it is a bad omen. It looked to me like Sally,’ said Harry, reassured, but shaken. Then, pulling himself together, he added: ‘Tell me, Claud, is it her lungs?’

‘It is more like decline, I think,’ said the girl. ‘A lack of vital force, a want of will to live.’

‘If she cares for me she will want to live now, for my sake. Has that woman been bullying her?’

‘Mrs. Brand is not pleasant to live with

at any time ; not genial, you know. And a sympathetic little soul like that requires indulgence.'

'But has she been bullying her about me, or about other men?' persisted Harry.

'She simply never allows your name to be mentioned. But sometimes—well, when she sees the prospect of a good match for her daughter, she is very trying.'

'What a lot girls have to go through! It's awfully hard lines on them all round,' exclaimed the young man, as they lifted the heavy leathern curtain of the church and passed out. A man was leaning against one of the door-posts. He started as the two young English people came out, more quickly, apparently, than he expected, and raising his hat hurriedly to Claud, he retreated.

'What ! do you know that fellow ?'

Harry exclaimed, with true British disdain.

‘Certainly; he is an artist—Durante Donati. I should have spoken to him if he had not made off in such a hurry.’

‘Are you aware that he was skulking after us when we entered the church?’ asked Harry. ‘I thought he was one of these lazy vagabonds on the look-out for an easy job—a model or cicerone, don’t you know? But if it was a friend of yours, I think it was—well, confoundedly impertinent of him!’

‘My dear Harry, calm your ire. Signor Donati probably wished to speak to me. I see him every day. He is my maestro.’

‘Oh, your drawing-master!’ said Harry, forgetful of Claud’s claims to be an artist. ‘Well, I should drop that scowling fellow if I were you, and put some Englishman in

his place: there are plenty of them in Rome. But about Sally. I have determined, since her mother is evidently incapable of taking care of her, to take the matter into my own hands; and if Mrs. Brand will not consent to an engagement, I shall try to persuade Sally to marry me at once.'

'In the meantime, this is the street in which they live,' said Claud, as they turned into the Via del' Angelo Custode. 'Their apartment is in that palace, on the third floor. Now, shall I go first and prepare Sally; and will you follow in a minute or two? And oh! let us hope that Mrs. Brand is out.'

'I don't care whether she is out or in; and I'll come up with you if you please, Claud. I don't want the door shut in my face at starting. If I can once get a footing, I am quite ready to defy Mrs. Brand.'

‘Ah, but you don’t know what she is yet,’ observed Claud, who thought prudence would be the safer policy.

‘I know quite enough about her. I know that she has nearly murdered my little girl. I know that I wouldn’t trust her with the care of an ordinarily intelligent tortoise. She’d make its life a misery somehow!’ exclaimed the young fellow, whom anxiety on his darling’s account had rendered reckless.

They were going up the ill-lighted and worse-kept stone stairs that served as highway to all the apartments in the palace. They had many corners to turn before they got to the third piano, and once or twice they seemed to hear a considerable amount of puffing and panting a little way above them; but they saw no one but the usual brigands-on-half-pay people who are fond

of frequenting these public stairs, presumably going on business to one or other of the many occupiers of these flats.

As they reached the landing to the third piano they beheld Mrs. Brand just in front of them, making a frantic and really heroic struggle to reach the entrance to her apartment first. Claud was struck with consternation at the sight, and stood still in speechless horror; but Harry was in too exalted a state of mind to care for anyone or anything but the sight of his darling.

‘Not at home—non in casa a nessuno—*nessuno*, do you hear?’ panted Mrs. Brand to the astonished Italian domestic, who had chanced to see her mistress’s approach and was holding the door open.

She saw also the *bel giovane* on the staircase, and with an Italian’s quick perception in love-matters, she divined the

affair. Her sympathies were all with the handsome young man, but how she would have acted we have no opportunity of knowing—possibly she would have diplomatized, pretended to shut the door, and have left it ajar, for instance; but here a miracle happened. The invalid, who had not walked through the anterooms for days, suddenly appeared, looking like a ghost, but with a glad light in her eyes. She passed her mother, who was gasping for breath and had completely collapsed on a chair. She passed the open-mouthed Raffaelina, still holding tightly to the door, and she came with outstretched hands to Harry, by this time at the top of the stairs.

‘I knew you were coming, Harry; I have felt all the morning that you were near me,’ she cried in her weak voice, that still had a ring of triumph in it. She was so glad

that her heart was right that loved him, and her brain was wrong that doubted him. She was so exultant that she could blame herself and glorify her lover. 'Will you forgive me, dear? I have been so wicked as to doubt you.'

And Harry forgave her instantly, on the spot.

END OF VOL. II.



